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The Fence

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Compiled and Edited by

Deepali Junjappa

HALF BAKED BEANS LITERATURE
e-mail: publish.halfbakedbeans@gmail.com

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Dedications

I would like to thank my grandfather Late Shri Mahesh Chand Agarwal who imbibed in me the linguistic and writing skills

- Shruti Agarwal

I would like to express my gratitude to entire team of Half Baked Beans for organizing the workshop which triggered the writing gene hidden in us!

- Akash

I would like to thank Half Baked Beans for providing a platform to showcase my thoughts and to everybody who has picked up this book to read. Content is the King.

- Kabir Malhotra

I want to specifically thank Akshay and Paridhi for proofreading everything I write, Harprit for making me understand the science of characterisation and to family, friends & readers of my work who egg me on in this direction and always have constructive feedback for my work.

- Vishal Bagaria

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About Yashluv

An engineering student – a wanderlust soul; a seven-point someone – an aspiring writer; Yashluv Virwani juggles between two parallel walks of life, simultaneously. A blogger and a published author, he derives maximum pleasure when the irritating sound of the keys of his laptop never stops ticking, or when the ceaseless roads paint his shoes dirty. An avid reader and cinema-watcher, he is fascinated by the works that describe the lives of Alexander Supertramp and Ernesto ‘Che’ – for they chose to be lost in life, with a purpose.

Ilustrado's Eulogy

"*She has a sly smile, and eyes that seem to see my essence as they explore my soul and implore my spirit to enter her. I look at her and I see love."*

- Jarod Kintz

'*Foolish humans!*' exclaimed the post-master, tying a bunch of letters with a red ribbon and tossing them into scrap, '*will write foolish sentimental things to one another with an improper address and trouble me'* he placed the china-glass over the desk and filled it up with his favourite brand of whiskey, '*letters in the days of e-mail!*' he smirked, '*foolish job!*'

Holding a scissor in one hand, he played with the tip of his nose with the other, cutting the over-grown salt from within the nose, humming a melody. Gulping down the whisky from the china-glass, he moved the palm of his hand over the strands of hair on either side of his head, *'One day!*' he smiled at the person sitting in front of him, through the mirror, '*one day we will run away from the foolish world and grow bananas in our fields.*'

Just as he got up to refill his energy drink, he found a letter resting beneath the decade old radio, over the desk, '*what are you doing here, foolish piece of shit?*' he dismissed the off-white paper having intricate creases on its delicate surface and shot up looking for the bottle.

He came back to his seat, and turned on the radio, tuning over from frequency to frequency, his eyes wavering back to the letter. He sighed and pulled out the letter, '*foolish me!*' The letter dropped from his hand and settled pretty somewhere beneath the couch. He went down on his knees and bent, looking under the sofa, the torch clasped tightly between his jaws, his hand reaching out to the letter, his head banging onto the floor in the interim, '*foooish whissfy!*' he mouthed.

Throwing his modest bum on the fragile springs of the brown, leather couch, he put the near-sighted specs on his awkwardly enormous nose and read...

Greetings from a musician from some part of your country – I wish this letter finds you in the best possible frame of mind and health for here's an

exercise I would want you to indulge into before you flip through the pages, reading this letter.
Close your eyes and breathe into the paper of this letter, sniff!

'*Foolish musician'* the post-master complained yet obliged. His brows quivered as he inhaled the aroma of the tender leaf resting in his hand.

This, my dear friend, is a hand-made paper sculpted by an old man sitting under the scorching sun in a part of Rajasthan, and dried through the weary palms of his wife. Cheers, for you just made them smile!
Let's get back to talking now. Today, I'm going to share a story with you, an anecdote that changed my life; the story of my 'ilustrado'.

Our first meet dates back to about a year from today - seated by the riverside, I was strumming the guitar, watching the struggle of a certain crest of water and subsequently, losing it to the horizon. I came back to this little corner of mine often, more so in the last couple of years, having signed in for a career I had no clue about and a troubled family life, the winds here brought in the much required stability to my mind. But that day, I waited for water from above; rains that would eat up the clear skies and fall, just for me.
'Excuf me!' a shrill voice made my wandering thoughts lose their trail, '*could you pleaf un-tie this bandanna?*' the voice stuttered. The girl, seemingly in her late twenties, waited for me to respond, holding onto her smile consistently as I eyed her, dumbfounded – she struggled to sit erect on a wheel chair, her fragile legs taking a sharp left around the knees; one of her hands hanged lethargically from over the arm-rest as the other rested pretty on the stick that controlled the movements of the rubber wheels. She was dressed in faint denims and a black, oversized tee. A red bandanna complemented her distinct Mediterranean looks.
'Ernesto Guevara!' I responded, obliging the girl, reclining my red guitar onto the wall.
'Hey you know hif first name!' her dolichomorphic skull swayed a little, *'I thought he was simply c-confined to t-shirt p-pinfs and bandanna thef-dayf.'*

‘*Wannabe musicians and wanderlust souls sure do have an idea about the similar kinds’* I smiled, picking up my guitar.

‘Two ve-ey heavy woffs used in plu-ual to desc-cibe youf-’ she broke off, ‘*God! Y-you making me use too much of-’* her tongue rolled exactly three times as she tried producing the sounds of R and Z, but what came out was only water, leaving the two of us laughing at her helplessness.

Her speech reminded me of the way my grandfather slurred when he was three pegs down. I distinctly remember how irritated I used to get when he started speaking that way and I would similarly be acknowledging your irritation as you read through her speech – probably that’s why I’d try and include only a small part of her speech from the dialogues that we exchanged.

*‘I’m g-glad I ee-minded you of a be-loved’ s*he shot back listening to my grandfather story, stating that the place cast mystic spells over her to which I replied that I shared a similar feeling and presented my demand for rains to her.

‘I w-wish to q-qoute Ofcar W-wilde here’ she gave me a disgusted look and parroted the amazing writer – They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever. *‘W-winds*!’ she tried to raise her pitch, in vain, ‘*not w-water!*’ Do not hurry things – she told me - enjoy them the way they come to you.

‘Pa-aplegic’ she succeeded in revealing her medical condition at the second attempt, *‘l-limbs no wokk; m-mouth ovee woks!’* and added that an car ran into her as she rode her two-wheeler, four years back.

I was surprised at the relative ease at which I opened up to her; about the relationship of my parents, that only existed because of the society, I complained that if there was no love, why even stay together just to show it to the people and whine about each other to me, ruining the peace of my mind when it had already been ruptured by the heavy books of unfortunate career choice.

‘M-may be becof they h-have only y-you’ she smiled, *‘and m-may be becof they to-gather only foo y-you!’* her wicked smile and sluggish voice had tangled me into thinking about the “love for me” which I only perceived as a “showing off to the society.”

I had been an easily offended, rebellious child back then and tried only to defend my perception, to which she grumbled that I had been straining her

vocal chords that sieved only medicines through to the grumpy old stomach and not vodka, and asked me to search for her diary in her handbag.

Her handbag, a white fluffy sac of half leather and half cloth read out in black – Time has wonderful way of showing what really matters. I dished out a diary that had a sparrow printed in front of the Eifel Tower, the former being almost double the size of latter. She then referred to the Rajasthani couple I mentioned above, asking me to breathe through to the last page...

I'm in love with this place – the sounds of the river are music to my ears, the winds my muse. Today is the third anniversary of my paralysis and life has been going pretty strong. It is meant to because these birds that fly in flocks over my head will continue flying, for they need to see the world before their wings die out; the river would continue on its course for it has to cuddle its darling ocean; the little boy to my left will keep picking up the rubbish for he has a family to feed back home; the couple sitting next me would continue with their desperate make-out actions for only heaven knows why - okay the guy is hot!; the vehicles out there would keep honking for everyone needs to reach somewhere, where is my question; and my dearest mother would keep writing whatever shit I produce off my twisted tongue for she has all the love in this world for me! And, she'll keep crying too.

Time would slip by with me sitting here on this very chair, that gives my dying out bums the creepiest of sores, having only two choices in hand – sit back and cry because I'm dying or breathe, breathe for I've been bestowed with chance to breathe; breathe because I still can wear a smile on my face...

Trust me friend, I read the writings over the small piece of paper exactly three times before the water in my eyes made my visions blurry. To this, she teased me for being a little kid and soon became philosophical – the very problem with us is, she spoke, her eyes glued to the sky, that we always are too harsh on ourselves. If try and fool ourselves that the world is too huge to control and our shoulders too weak to bear the load, half of our lives problems would end then and there; the fact is, when the bigger picture unfolds, these problems would never really matter.

You'd be knocked down to your feet and punched right in your nose as you get back up when you follow what your heart doesn't want you to. Instead, go out and smile, even if it turns out to be only half a one at that, she said, flashing her half smile.

I then ran through her diary, reading out over a hundred small messages written by people who had been complete strangers to her until some months back but had completely fallen in love with her post the first meet, just like I had. She coined these messages as her eulogy and insisted me on writing one for her. But all I could manage was the head, *'Ilustrado's Eulogy'* for I had read out all the possible messages that described her, ranging from, *'Thank you for changing my life!'* to *'You're an angel, a daughter I never had' and one of those even went onto read, 'You, my princess, are an amazing kisser!'* And I was confused, lest I could do was promise her that I would write a eulogy to her, someday.

She then led me to my first live performance – right on the streets just outside the riverside. I played the tunes she wanted me to as she mouthed the lyrics in her very own donkey pace, wearing a placard that read – Smile, You're Beautiful. And she did make the onlookers smile, some even joined in on her songs, matching her pace while others broke into a jig, clicking pictures with her as she happily obliged. Such was the audacity of this paraplegic girl who, instead of hiding away with her vulnerabilities, had embraced them.

I once happened to ask her if she ever felt bad for herself, of her condition. She laughed me off stating she was more than human to feel all of that, but one fine day, it occurred to her that someone sitting right up there had been gracious enough to let her live that day on the road, trembling with shock, covered in the pool of her own blood, yet breathing, when instead He could have easily snatched away that right from her. That was the day she started living.

Ilustrado, the Spanish term for *"the enlightened one*", truly lived up to the name I gave her, lending music to my lifeless strumming. And for this very reason, I write this letter to you and four others, all complete strangers, because I want her story to lend breath to your bodies, life to your souls.

She left the wheel-chair and her body yesterday, her soul, I'm sure must be flying somewhere around with the birds up there for she was always meant to fly. At her grave, the eulogies were read out, as everyone around me had

a smile on their lips and a tear in their eye. I write this eulogy, as I had once promised to her, and send it to you for I want it to travel from you to a handful others, making each one of us smile through the dark hours into the sun, just like Ilustrado held my hand that day and led me here, leaving us on a bright, sunshine day.

The post-master placed the letter and the specs on his knee, rubbing the moisture off his eyes. *'Time to sleep, it's an early day tomorrow'* he sighed, *'and the last; my bananas' are waiting'* he smiled.

About Kabir

Kabir believes in the motto "Jack of all trades and master of none". He is a part -time traveler, amateur writer , social media enthusiast and entrepreneur in the making. Hails from Dehradun and loves going to Himachal.

The Other Woman

In his marriage of five years, this was a first. Raj was going back home at 3 p.m. taking a half day leave from the office. He had decided to confide everything to Priya, his wife.

Why had he been ignoring her? Not paying attention to her and not even making love? All these questions were making him restless although he knew the reason---- Sonia, his secretary.

He had been in an extra-marital affair with her for three years.

Sitting at the bar counter, in an office party he had seen this pretty girl for the first time - tall, big-eyed with black straight hair, coming in. Eyes brimming with happiness she came inside and shook hands with the host; then a while later he met her… They might have danced a little together, he couldn't remember. He was too drunk that day to remember anything but her. After a couple of random meetings mainly spent working together, he realized she was everything that he had wanted in his partner- looks, smartness, ability to hold a conversation and an appetite for sports. Naturally, he fell for her. He did not know whether he was in love with her but she was all that he wanted since a long time. She came in and changed him completely.

Nonetheless, Rahul, his colleague and best friend, had reminded him of its repercussions time and again.

Rahul had tried hard to persuade Raj to give up on Sonia and return back to Priya. In fact, he tried convincing him that she would forgive him wholeheartedly and take him back if he does that. But that further repelled him from her. His tender, magnanimous, loving wife completely put him off and he was not able to give this a reason.

He remembered a conversation he had with Rahul a while back. Rahul had become quite serious and had tried to explain to him, *"Listen, whatever you are doing is not right. Why don't you just confess to Priya and get a divorce?"*

Raj shook his head and massaged his temples, his voice was brimming with emotion as he tried to explain his juxtaposition, *"You won't understand*

Rahul. Mine was an arranged marriage. If I leave Priya, my parents would never forgive me. She was their choice. Besides, she is loyal and forgiving. She is happy with me. Why to spoil that?"

Rahul sighed and asked, *"Don't you ever feel guilty?"*

"I do but, I am not the only one in the world doing it. Can't I have a little bit of happiness? Nobody has to know. You are the only one who knows and anyway I am going to end it soon.", Raj exclaimed.

"Well, I have been hearing this statement forever. If only you could change this thing about you, you would be perfect."

"I like imperfections."

"Yeah right"...

Rahul had always been a good friend. But, since some time, he had given up trying to persuade Raj to stop living this double life. Maybe, he understood it would be of no use.

Also, when Raj had said *"I am going to end it soon",* he was consciously aware of the meaninglessness of his statement; He was saying it just to stop his friend from speaking further on the issue.

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Arranged marriage! He was bound to Priya in this marriage because of his parents. As he repeatedly explained to Rahul, it was the boundations of an arranged marriage and the fear of losing the love and support of his parents that kept him hooked to Priya. If it wasn't for his parents, maybe their marriage wouldn't have lasted even a year. He did like Priya initially. He believed she was a wonderful woman, but the day he met her, he knew, it would never be love for him, ever. He knew she was too docile for him, too sweet, too homely. He had always wanted someone who was wild, crazy and fun. He wanted to fill the space in his life, the void of the monotony in which he lived. Someone who could break his schedule, who could challenge him, who would be ready to experience new things with him. Priya wasn't that woman. On the contrary, she was an absolute opposite. Priya instead tried to fill her entire life around her husband; he always completed her in her eyes. She was modest, loyal, mellow and dutiful. She wasn't an explorer or a dreamer, nor was she an adventurous person. But she was other good things. She was sincere and truthful. She cared with all her heart. She most devotedly gave herself in the marriage. She respected

his parents. She was simple, compassionate and forgiving. She easily and quickly accepted the inexpressive, unemotional nature of Raj (which was not completely true. He just could not bring himself to be romantic and caring towards her as he simply did not love her). She was uncomplaining, genuine and friendly. She most easily became friends with people and could win anyone's heart, so everyone in his family, with an exception to him, loved her).She was the kind of woman who would provide warmth, comfort and ease to her partner, always.

Priya remained Priya all through the marriage. Though she surely gave her best to her husband, the poor woman never really understood him, she belonged to him but he refused to possess her. Sonia on the other hand did not remain just *"Sonia",* there was a new thing to discover about her with passing time and the experiments did not stop there .They continued in the car, hotel rooms and Sonia's apartment.

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It was not like that Sonia did not confront him with the question *"where are we heading"* or felt jealous. Like, the other day when he was at an office party with Priya, it was solely because it was specially mentioned in the invites that all must attend with their spouses and Priya was the 'official' woman in his life…

They came, they greeted everyone, Raj introduced her as his wife to everyone present, and they danced and remained together in the party all the while. But right after that, Raj handed over the car keys to her and asked her to drive back home.

Why?

He said he was crashing at a colleagues' place that night.

The truth was, he was crashing at Sonia's. Priya was his reality and Sonia his escape.

Sonia lived in the moment.In her heart she knew that there was no future with Raj but she also could not stop herself from falling for him. He was completely different with her, he would crack jokes, cook for her and the best part-he could not take his hands off her. It was a passionate relationship.

What's strange is the fact that Raj didn't even feel much guilt or regret about what he was doing. Like he told Rahul he was just trying to enjoy his share of happiness. What he was doing was not such a big deal, because he was not the only one doing it.

Sometimes when he did feel slight pity for his lawfully wedded wife, he would take her out for dinner or buy her a random gift or just a bunch of roses.

He knew it was easy to please her; her ways to happiness weren't as complicated as his.

It was difficult to identify what Raj was doing as an evil. There was no absolute answer to *'Why'?* Though maybe Raj wasn't all wrong; certainly he was not right either. What did he do wrong? He just made a choice he wanted, in opposition to the one that was imposed on him.

***

For Raj, his marriage was over long back. For Priya, her marriage was everything…

But, today while making out with Sonia in the office bathroom, he saw himself in the mirror and a strange lightning struck. He felt bitter about himself. He didn't see himself but probably a monstrous image of him, a man who was playing with his innocent wife. He saw a cheat. He saw a man who was too much of a coward, to be honest. He saw someone he hadn't known before. He saw what Rahul had been trying to make him see, he saw Raj who was married to Priya but making out with Sonia while Priya waited for him back home.

Priya was beautiful. She was homely, gentle and loving. Like a dutiful wife and homemaker, she did everything to keep her husband happy. But it was her gentleness that Raj didn't want. He craved for impulsive, boisterous and passionate. Everything Priya wasn't and Sonia was.

Priya made the most delicious food, but he didn't like it; whereas, his colleagues and friends would come home time to time for its sake. Like the last weekend, Rahul and others were there for dinner and he couldn't stop praising the *Kheer* she had made. In fact, everyone else present there loved

it. Raj didn't even feel like tasting it. The fact that it was so good, that Priya had made it,was enough for him to not even want to taste it..

Priya had often tried to bridge the gap. Like, on a Friday evening when Raj came home, he should have been pleasantly surprised to find Priya glowing in the bright red saree, her beautiful ornaments and the vermilion that colored her hair parting. Any man would have fallen prey to that serenity, but Raj didn't. He kissed her on the forehead and said *"am very tired",* and went to sleep. Being the kind of woman Priya was, in the morning Raj was served with his favourite breakfast and tea for a fresh new day.

Brim with remorse, he decided to confess the truth to Priya and ask for her forgiveness. With this thought, he sat in his car and drove back home. But this journey wasn't easy. All he could think of, and about, was Sonia. *His Sonia.* It was perhaps involuntary, but the only thing that occupied his mind, that kept him indulged on this drive back home, were all the fond memories he had of the woman he loved, who wasn't his wife.

Every day, every moment he met her, his heart melted, it melted drop by drop forming a new mould of attraction, attachment, and respect. This new heart was brimmed with her, her thoughts. Her very name has now become the reason that made him smile. He could visualize her eyes, her lips and her nose with his closed eyes. He could smell her hair even when she was not around, he could hear her voice without her speaking and he could see her deep inside himself. She meant the world to him.

And today, today when he met her in that café, when she sipped his coffee, only to taste it and say *"hardly any difference",* he loved that. He loved that rustic side to her personality which refused to comprehend the sophisticated styles. How she refused to accept any difference between a Cappuccino and a Café Latte'. And his explaining would never make a difference.

The sultriness with which she, for the first time, got drunk with him. And right before that when she held his right palm between her palms and sandwiching it tightly, looked into his eyes and murmured *"see, I trust you".*

He often wondered how colourful can a person be? The day he met her, she was one person, today, she is a thousand and tomorrow she will be thousand

and one. Each day she showed him something new, about her, about life, about love, about character, about people. Every moment she came up with something new, and he never got bored. And if he did, she pulled him to her and put his head on her lap and say *“go to sleep”.* And when he woke up, she would sometimes be ready with a chocolate cake, sometimes with a movie, sometimes a candle light dinner, but something different to entertain him, oh she was so amazing, he thought. He also thought of one similarity in the two women- how both cooked so well, but he loved to wake up to the aroma of food only at Sonia’s place.

He loved how sometimes in the middle of the night she would just wake up, make coffee, wake him up and say *"let's have a conversation".* And the next thing he knew iswould already be morning..

He loved the way they watched Cricket. And loved to be amazed suddenly by looking at her sitting beside him on the sofa getting excited when an Indian player would hit a six and get the realization, wow he is with her; this amazing woman who once played in the state team.

He loved her for all the unconventional choices she made.

And he loved her impulsive planning. For instance, just a day ago she declared *"we are going to Bombay";* and *why? to watch the match, of course.* She had already booked tickets. The adventurous side of her always made him skip a beat.

He also recalled how two months ago she sent him a text message post-midnight sometimes, “*Andaman?”* And he wanted to know - Why?

"Snorkeling, scuba diving, water skiing and a lot of sex", snap came the reply.

The next thing they did was take a leave and take off.

Still thinking about Sonia, he entered the driveway of his society. As he reached in front of his building and put the brakes, his trance was broken. Looking at his building he went into introspection, how could he leave all that behind? And why should he? Why does he have to? The colors of Sonia versus the paleness of Priya, why did he even have to choose? But the decision was made and he knew, ‘it’s the right thing to do.’

With all these thoughts and still thinking about Sonia parallely, he entered the driveway of his building. As he stepped out of the car suddenly

something caught his attention. The family dog was sitting in the porch. It meant that Priya was having her afternoon nap. His parents lived in another city. So Priya would put the dog to watch and sleep. Raj thought not to be seen by the dog as it would come jumping on him and might awake her. He decided to park the car outside and tip-toe his way from the backside.

He moved ahead, with a strange sense of determination in his heart and mind. They were working together for a change. His head was pounding as a motley of thoughts just kept messing up his composure.

As he reached for the door knob, he was surrounded by multiple, mixed, strange feelings. He unlocked the door using his key instead. Strangely before this, he had never used it.

Already full of thoughts, he tiptoed his way inside the house. Something caught his attention and he froze. It was this photograph in the hallway that was placed on the coffee table beside the sofa of this ‘married’ couple on their honeymoon.

Standing side by side, her left arm below his shoulder and hair scattered by the wind, looking towards her husband and smiling shyly as he looked into her eyes,. It seemed like he was falling for her in that moment. That grin on his face contrasting her shy eyes. To his horror, the picture was a lie.

The door of ‘his bedroom’ was ajar, though everything visible. Wordless in that moment: under the sheet, he saw them.

He stood there for quite a while and finally absorbed what he saw and took a step back.

There she was; his perfectly loyal wife sleeping like a child in the arms of his best friend – Rahul.

In his own house where today he entered from the backside, he felt like an outsider. Today Priya was not the other woman in his life. Today he was the other man in hers. In his own house, today he did not belong. He was someone else. The man inside his bedroom, with his wife, in his house, was not his best friend. He was her man. Raj wasn’t.

Raj felt devastated, nauseated and cheated. Devastated at what life had made him and what he had made Priya and what Rahul had made of their

friendship. Nauseated because that was his best friend and his wife sleeping in his bed in his house. And “cheated” ….. WHY? He didn’t know.

Was there really any difference today between Him and Priya and Priya and Sonia and Sonia and Rahul and Rahul and him? But why Rahul? His best friend? And why Priya? What did he think of her and what she did? But isn’t he responsible for it himself?

But now he had no choice. Or probably he did. Probably he was granted the best choice. The choice he wanted to make in the first place. But did he have enough power to embrace it? He didn’t know.

Slowly walking back towards the door he had used to enter the house, Raj left. He used the stairs this time. With each step he took, he gained one ounce of composure. He got back his strength and sense. He knew he had to come to terms with it.

As he walked back to his car, he thought how when it comes to infidelity, all logics go for a toss.

He opened the door of the car, sat and took a deep breath.

He smiled ….

About Kevin

Kevin Missal is a IInd yr History Hon. in St. Stephen's College who has penned down two novels and a third one is in the process of being published. He has even written plays for college and School Theater. Currently, he is busy studying.

You can contact him on email: kevin.missal@yahoo.in

Phone no: 9811051338

The Smartphone

At the day she turned fifty five, her son gifted a smartphone.

"Why would you do this?" She looked up, crinkling her eyes, as she watched the boyish, thirty year old progeny. His face was lit up, regardless of her frowning distaste towards his gift. Maybe it was her oblivion that he innately laughed about. *"I mean, why?"*

"Because you are sitting at home alone, doing nothing but watching your stupid serials—like every day. You need to start doing something different."

"*And you think this is different?"* she flashed the box at him. *"You know na, baba, I don't know how to use these techno thingies. They go over my head. I'm okay with my TV."*

"Believe me, you won't regret it." He knelt down, as she crumpled a part of his formal pants.

"Arey, get up otherwise I would have to press it again for you."

"Tsk," he did as he was told and then grabbed the box from her. He started playing and toying with it, while she sat in her nightie, half asleep. He had waked her up early, for this gift, which was meaningless to her, but she didn't want to crib much. She didn't want the glumness to come on his face, so she just went with what he continued doing. For a moment, she was able to know why he gave her this. She was being too clingy, since her husband's premature death, always worrying about her son, or the fact why he comes late or why he goes early. It was all the time, worrying, calling him thrice a day. Deep down, she knew it was wrong and he was old enough to not be baby fed, but her instincts as a mother didn't let go of him.

"Here, I've opened up for you."

There was a flash. She had put her spectacles on to watch and study and learns. He taught her the basics—what is a smartphone? Why are they popular? Then he taught her about how to use your camera, your notepad, how to call someone. That was the first day. The third day, after she got used to most of it, he taught her what are Apps, and what kind of Apps are necessary in a Smartphone. He installed a Facebook App, a Whatsapp, a Facebook Messenger, Instagram and other things.

On the fifth day, she asked, *"What is an instagram?"*

"You click a pic and you instantly post it on the App to let everyone know what you have clicked."

"What about privacy from the public then?"

He grinned, as he was forked through his breakfast omelet that she with heart and passion make for him. *"We live in twenty first century, mama. There is no privacy."*

Whenever he used to leave, she used to toss the Smartphone in the corner, and watch serials, sometimes knit for her nieces who would come this September to meet her. She wouldn't tell this to him and hurt his feelings. She would often read books, when exceptionally bored and with no soapie on the TV. It was at the seventh day, when she had absolutely no work. Her son was gone and the phone lay in the corner, with its boxy like frame and tinted glass.

"Let's see how you kill time," she murmured, as she picked it up and fiddled through it.

Her son had made a Facebook profile for her, which she scrolled clumsily. She had no photograph, no cover photo and worst of all no update. But she didn't care much, until there were a lot of red markings in the top left corner of her profile page. She clicked it and realized, they were all request, from her family members and some from unknown. She accepted the ones from her family members, and the unknowns she kept aside. Later, that evening, she checked, and few of family had sent her messages on Facebook:

"Wow, good to see you here."

"Right time to join, eh?"

"Put up a picture, will you?"

The last one, from her distant cousin sort of tipped her off, and when her son came to visit her, she asked him: *"How does one put a picture?"*

He grinned, as if he wanted her to ask this. He began searching for good pictures in his cell phone, clicked on important events, such as Diwali and Holi. He finally did, to which he uploaded it, while she kept watching him. When it was done, she realized she looked really pretty and her entire profile, glowed like never before.

"What were you doing since morning?" he asked inquisitively, while she took the phone from him and kept glaring at the screen.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't call once."

"Oh I was…um…" flustered, she ran her fingers across black hair, pulling it back her ears.

"It's all right. I'm happy, you are spending time on this." He paused, squaring up to her. *"Can you now admit it, that this was a good birthday present?"*

"I suppose, yeah,"

"Great." He smiled.

"It's interesting."

"Time flies when you have it, and right now, at this age, you have a lot of time in your hand. Papa has gone. It's been ten years. You have left your teaching job. That's been two years. It's high time, you enjoy now, while I work."

She meekly nodded.

The next week, was exploring, talking to family members on phone, on text messages, trying to learn new APPS, play a few games that she was able to download. It was all a part of fun. Her phone calls to her son, from seven calls a day, had minimized to two, to reaching a point, where he used to call her and inform he'll get late, and she would just mumble through the phone and cut it.

"I am going for a trip to Manali, mama." He announced, on the weekend, shyly.

She looked up from her phone, pulled away her specs and sighed. *"Why now?"*

"I'm just really tired of all the corporate shit. This selling of properties, working at the stupid IREO has left me with this wearied void of nothingness. Can I please go and have some fun?"

"Fine,"

"Fine?"

"Yeah,"

"That easy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Most of the times, my friends would have to come over and convince you and then you would cry, kiss my head and say, go beta go, have fun. What happened suddenly?"

She glanced, once at the Smartphone. *"I just figure you've grown old enough to go."*

"Um, okay then," his mouth had grown small while she tapped her phone.

The next ten days, went in a buzz with her using Whatsapp and Facebook, more often than it was supposed to. She added her students from school, the alumni who had grown up. They would send pictures and comment, demanding to see her present picture and not the old one she had as her profile pic. To do so, she got it clicked once, with the help of her maid, who clumsily used to her Smartphone, and when she saw, she saw a reflection of her dead self. She was fat, stomp, with big eye bags and crumpled, pasty hair. She detested the image, deleting it.

She had to do something. She began applying face wash, every day and night, since then. Applied make up and clicked one of those "'selfies" (which with difficulty she learnt) to send to her students and her family members. She posted one on Whatsapp profile picture as well as on the Facebook. Likes and comments buzzed, as sudden warmth began to form around her chest. This heaviness which she had for so long, lifted and she actually felt nice…just very nice.

The next day, she exercised.

Her son appeared, getting dressed when he commented, *"I see you are putting up photos now,"*

"I thought it was high time."

He buttoned his shirt and narrowed his gaze. *"What are you doing?"*

"I just feel kind of overweight."

"Realized just now?"

"Yeah, well," she circled her legs and thighs.

He pulled up his tie. *"To be really honest, I would have to say, this is getting weird for me."*

"What do you mean?"

"You, like this," he signaled, embarrassingly. *"It's weird, to see you all… young."*

She stopped. *"You don't like that I'm living like this?"*

"No, I do…" defensively he pulled up his hands.

"I don't think you do. That's what you wanted, right? You wanted me to live to myself, work on my timing. Well, here I am. What do ya want now, eh?

You want me to go back again to that lazy slouch?"

"No," he flared his nostrils. *"No,"*

She could see he was trying to held on to his anger, and he finally did, grabbing for breaths and storming outside the flat. She resumed exercising and smiling on to the ceiling, as she did, picturing all the little things she would achieve if she would get thin. She could add nice photos, can go out, buy clothes and wear them without hesitation. She also wondered how many likes and comments she would receive. The idea of all of it, seemed so naïve yet admirable, enough to hold and grab to it.

It had been two months now, since she had received it. She felt weight difference, but not enough. Yet, it was enough to wear her old clothes, the ones that used to be tighter. She clicked pictures and sent them. And it was one day, a day she didn't quite remember, when she looked and her old student texted her.

"You look pretty, ma'm."

That was it. It was so simple but so pretty. She responded.

"Thank you."

"What are you doing these days?"

"Being in house,"

It led to her talking for two hours, straight. She felt warm, at the end of the conversation when they shared their numbers. Later, he called her, and they talked more. Then she had to leave the conversation, as her son had come home.

"What's for food, mama?" he asked, as he tossed his black bag across the sofa.

"Um…" she clenched her teeth, slowly realizing what she had done. *"I didn't cook anything."*

With an irritated grasp, sweat beads on his forehead, he asked: *"Why?"*

"I was…um…" she swallowed the fact. She couldn't tell she was busy having a laugh riot with her ex-student, having a fun conversation about how he is a writer and about his publishing process, *"I was sick."*

"What happened?"

"*I'll be fine."*

"You don't look sick, though."

"You don't trust me now?"

“No, no…”

“What do you want? I can make eggs.”

“Sure, do I have a choice?”

She didn’t repeat the mistakes. She would make the food earlier part of the day and then would talk to the ex-student, who repeatedly called her. It had been one month since their conversations, which she used to hide and delete, when the student asked her to meet outside. After the maid left, she dressed herself well, performed a few crunches and went out, at the mall. They met, hugged awkwardly and talked as they did on phone. Being a writer, he wasn’t stereotypical. He had arms bigger than her thighs and his jaw line just was jaunty enough to excite her. And he didn’t try hard, which was enough to get her attracted to him.

She was surprised that she could be attracted to someone…at this age, at least. It all seemed kind of weird, to which she excused herself and left the place. She reached home and grabbed for breath, as she looked at herself in the mirror. Was she being herself for a couple of months? Not sure. She was sure, someone else.

No. She nodded. She doesn’t have to. She’s finally living her life. She finally feels alive. All those days were of dread. She doesn’t watch television, she doesn’t look at the mirror with regret and most of all, she is happy.

She apologized via text later, for being so abrupt to which he was sweet about. They talked for few other weeks, where she behaved normal in front of her son, to not raise suspicion. After two weeks more, the student confessed she likes her. And she told him too. They would often talk at night, be it text or calls, when the son would sleep. She would often open Skype and talk face to face. But as she did, the student demanded more.

“Will you send me…you know…”

“What?”

“Nudes,”

“You kidding me?”

“Come on, babe.”

“No,”

“I want to see that sexy bode.”

The idea of her having a sexy body at this age sort of alarmed, but his request just sort of boosted her ego. She felt good that he thought, he actually thought her body was sexy.

That night, she sent pictures, with her bathroom flashiness over it. And the next day, she woke up late, to find her son looking through her phone.

She instantly pulled up to get it, and as she did, his expressions didn't fidget. She had the phone, but the alertness in his eyes was filled with horror.

"How did you open it?" she asked him, as she looked that he was watching the photos she had sent to the student. And the question instantly made her bite her tongue, as she recalled how he was the first one to store the password, and since then, she hadn't changed it. It was a slip of mind, perhaps, she could say that made her forget.

"Why?" he gritted his teeth. *"Why would you do this?"*

"Who gave you the permission…"

"I BOUGHT THIS DAMN PHONE, LADY!"

"Lady? Is that how you talk to your mother?" she began to come up, when he grabbed her by the throat and pushed her down on the bed. Tears swirled around his cheeks, as it trickled over at her face.

She choked and coughed, struggling with words.

"Why are you being a fuckin slut, eh? Why? Why? Tell me!"

She wanted to say, but her words, were emptying as it left her mouth. And finally, she grabbed for her cell phone, at the thought of being called a slut. She went for it and slammed it across his forehead. He collapsed on the side, with another jolt, she hit the phone again, and again. Blood began to spurt. A crack began to form on the skull, but she kept hitting, until the phone was stuck in the flesh and the last breath of her son's life.

She looked at it for a moment, in confusion. Her son had his eyes opened and mouth closed, with his blood pooled on the patterned colors of her bed sheet. And the only thought of her and her existence, began to slowly form a very, dark and pitiful void. A void, which she was beginning to escape for so long. And she knew, she just knew, that this void was going to be here for quite some time.

About Rohan

A full time banker and a part time blogger and freelance writer cum editor who has interests in reading and writing fiction. He has his short stories and poems published in many anthologies and is soon coming out with a novel.

You can get in touch with him at
Blog - http://ponderingtwo.blogspot.in
Twitter - @rohank01
Facebook - www.facebook.com/rohan.kachalia

Resignation to Heaven

Everyone has one wish that be fulfilled by others while lying on the death bed – That be damned. For him, from now on, the only thing that mattered is to see that they die.

Cosmic had interfered in a huge way, that's what he fell and it was working as a driving force for him. No one knew but there was such intimacy in his voice that had the capability to mesmerize people even with a simple *'Hi'*. Also, it required only a set of few words for him to complete the task at hand. Thus, making it an 'event'.

And when cosmic looked the other side, he had only few things to do - Read the morning daily sitting upon the commode, order and receive a set of instructions over his I-phone while at work, have a rigorous workout session and a daily evening high tea with his set of friends before retiring for the night but not before making love to the succulent, voluptuous and sometimes mysterious in her very own ways, his wife. *"With him… Sex is never a consolation, it's an event."* She had quoted it to one of the English dailies when they were interviewed as one of the beautiful couples under fifty.

When age was catching up with people all around, he seemed to be at ease. At 6 feet tall, pair of green and dark brooding eyes, with well-toned physique that highlighted his muscles and abs; he looked surreal. Most of the times he had given ladies of his age as well as to those quite younger to him a run for their money. He had them literally drool over him wherever he went. But he drooled over something else apart from his wife, something different and something vicious.

Standing on the edifice of his tall and muscular mansion, overlooking the strikingly lit Bandra Worli sea link and at an unearthly hour of two at night with a filled Glencairn whisky glass in his hand, he had allowed his thoughts to wander. He kept circling the glass with his fingers while still in his hand and looked distinctly at some point. A smile somewhat relaxed his piercing gaze and eased the creases that had formed on his forehead. And the very next second he gulped down the brown liquid in one go, closing his eyes and left a chuckle. "*Some distances can easily be killed. And they better be killed.*"

Sitting on the commode the next morning he giggled his way to the news item. *"It's just a start guys. Am sure you and your kins will have a field day pretty soon! Or rather days."* He subjected the walls to a fit of his laughter allowing the release of a fair bit of endorphin into his system.

He hurried out completing his chores in a jiffy much to his wife's surprise. She had just laid out some fresh scented candles and was still in her silky robe when he grabbed her from behind by her waist and pinned her onto their king size bed.

"What's the matter darling?" She uttered as he fought her robe.

She looked at his widened green eyes and was mesmerized for a second for it had a certain amount of enigma into it. And moreover it sparkled like the sun beaming on the waters of the sea. It had that energy and radiance which could literally make the eyes to bleed.

And within no time he was inside her, caressing her, stroking her, drinking her like never before; relieving him from the stress that came with the planning of the vicious activities. The more she heaved and moaned, more the pleasure she derived, more the increase in the intensity of his love making. Consumed, they laid next to each other with his eyes cooling off to the normal self.

"Dan!!" She heaved and continued. *"That was first at dawn and a piercing one!"* She snuggled besides him with an air of flush around her.

"Just like someone has pierced a needle inside!" He exclaimed at the top of his voice, his cheeks shining at the thought.

"Needle? Pierced?" What are you saying honey? I didn't get a word!

"A little prick on the skin, although oblivious." He continued in his own trance and before he could continue any further, Radhika shook him to reality.

"Dan, you ok Dan?"

"Oh…um… Yeah . Yeah… I'm fine."

She fell relieved to his side. Although she was a bit worried about Dan being suddenly lost into his own world and more importantly just after sex, but she chose not to speak now. She brushed it aside for some appropriate time and continued circling around his heart.

"It was like cosmic interfering in a huge way for you have never sustained so long, culminating it into an event of a lifetime!"

Rads answered with a fair amount of flush on her face, probably yet to be digested that something like this has ever happened, upon being asked by Dan.

His cheeks widened not due to his wife's appreciation of his manhood but due to the word 'Cosmic'.

Yes, cosmic had started interfering in own strange ways.

Dan and few of his Dalal Street friends were sitting and hobnobbing over a cup of tea on the following Sunday, spread on the small lush of green that beautified the mansion which Dan owns. They raised their cups for a customary toast in acknowledging a lavish life and filled the atmosphere with their little fun filled banter.

The banter after finding its way to the stocks which interested them and on stocks to lookout for eventually took a turn to the front page headlines which had garnered attention since past few days now.

The intensity changed. And so did the colour as he kept staring at the crimson hue of the sinking sun, with that night flashing in front of him.

Breaking in would prove to be a bit difficult and so he had asked to make the necessary changes to her attire and the overall presentation.

She flashed her I-card as they welcomed her inside and directed her to a room. She was at ease but they were already left a bit startled with her striking appearance which consisted of a white long coat, a walk which she didn't need to perfect, for it came naturally to her, much to her own surprise, and a small white lily balanced delicately between the narrow gap connecting her right ear to the head. More importantly she had the sparkle in her eyes making it way too easier for her then she had actually anticipated. She had mesmerized them with her sheer presence, style and succulent voice.

She rubbed her palm over the head and looked intently with a dramatic change of colour on her face. The contours of her face suggested sadness had gripped her from all sides. But at the same time she was focused and driven by cosmic. Focused on the job which she was there to carry out and she did. She injected the vial of the medicine. Medicine, which would not save a life, but would set the life free.

Cosmic had interfered, all according to what Dan had asked.

A snap of fingers and a wild shake from one of his friend brought Dan back to enjoying his tea and the sun setting in.

It took media another set of five cosmic interferences to bring it to limelight on the national television. Aman, the fearless and the loudest voice on the television was at his top form, grilling his panelists that ranged from retired police officers to doctors and some analysts. Dan was sitting in his locked room and was guffawing at the culmination of the debate, clutching his stomach hard as he feared he would die listening to the morons arguing and shouting over their voices. It is only from there that the print media picked it up.

He sighed upon reading the newspaper the next morning. *"I always walk the talk"*, Dan said out aloud throwing the newspaper away and continued with his ablutions.

"What do we have?" barked the commissioner at his investigating inspector.

"Weird and different description of the man with no common thread."

"In simpler terms please."

"Probably six different men or a single man with motive yet to be found out. The deceased are of varying age groups. That means he is striking selectively and most importantly we are presuming the accused to be a he as each and every one of the deceased's relatives have different description to give." He summed up in a nutshell.

"So basically we have no clues at all. No finger prints, probably no past records and the accused can be a lady too", reiterated the commissioner falling back on his chair.

"And all these incidents took place when the deceased was left at the maid's mercy. At all the six places." The inspector added.

"Hmm… The commissioner nodded and continued. *"So either they might be lying or must be a part of the crime."*

"What is more shocking is that the relatives are not coming forward to lodge a FIR", cried the inspector. *"I fear a media trial soon",* he sighed and looked at the commissioner who had nothing to add.

Dan came out fresh, his skin smelling a divine concoction of citrus and marginal extracts of ylang ylang with the dampness still all over his chiseled physique. Rads saw him appearing from the corner of her eye and waited for him to be at a perfect position.

"Time to reverse the tables" she whispered blindfolding him and taking him out of the blue.

He moaned while she persisted. Consumed, they lay on the floor.

"Rads, I sense that some shades from the book have been literally performed", Dan looked at her and winked placing a juicy kiss on her lips. Radhika could see that sparkle in his green eyes as she hugged him tight.

The night was pretty calm. But the morning was equally chaotic if not more for the police commissioner. A body placed exactly at the front of the police station was received by one of the constables during the change of duties. It was exactly similar to one of the descriptions given to the police while they had interrogated one of the maids. But the only problem was that it was a puppet molded into a figure, filled with cotton and not with flesh and blood. Someone was making a mockery of the investigation and this didn't go too well with the commissioner. To increase his woes, media was at its best; jumping the gun with accusations flying like rockets and without any substantial evidence on hand it gave them an upper hand. *"So typical of the media! Can someone hurl a bomb at these jokers?"* He pleaded to no one in particular.

"Call a press conference and plant a lie that whoever is the mind behind the crime has left a substantial clue behind, including a trail. Put some ass behind the bar. Pay him well to keep his mouth shut." The commissioner ordered the investigation officer with the hope that they will buy some time and come out with the actual mind behind it.

"But only if wishes were horses…" chuckled Dan watching the press conference on the LED screen.

The commissioner had barely scraped through a couple of weeks when a distress call from the top suburban hospital made his life even more miserable.

"Few days before, these four photographs had been found on few of the patient's beds. We brushed it as a prank but today morning they were all found dead." Uttered a trembling voice of the head nurse when bombarded with charges and number of years to be spent in jail for medical negligence. These photographs were exactly similar to the descriptions given by those maids. The head nurse didn't knew that the entire hospital staff could be under scrutiny and eventually the survival of the hospital itself could be in jeopardy if the relatives of the patients files a complaint. Which, in this case they did. Thus mounting the pressure on the investigation officers and the commissioner, making it difficult for them to breathe. On the other

hand, media played their part by rubbing the salt in the wound like only then can.

Zoomed in images of the photographs were displayed on the screen with 'breaking news' flashing in. *"The police's bluff has been caught. These are the same images which the authorities already had and sat upon doing nothing",* charged one of the relatives of the deceased who was being treated at the hospital. *"The hospital also has a lot to answer. There must be a mole inside who didn't let the relatives know about these photographs",* charged another. *"Exactly",* barged Aman. *"Still the bigger problem which is even looming larger than ever before is that there is no sign of any evidence and of the culprit"*, concluded Aman.

"What the forensics has to say?" asked the commissioner. *"Poison. It is a cold blooded murder,"* replied the investigating officer. *And moreover the CCTV footage from the hospital is not that clear. It simply shows a pair of eyes. Rest is all covered in the uniform. We have even matched with each and every person working in that damn hospital."* He shook his head with a grim look on his face. And moreover we don't even know who placed the photographs and when as the footage shows only their backs.

"So, the hospital authorities might be involved or it might be the same person again or it must be a hand in glove murder including someone from the security manning the gates" he added.

"Damn those idiot relatives. Had they agreed to file a complaint we would have got some tests done on them and could have come to a fair conclusion. Now, since the photographs and the sketches match, I guess we can assume the death of those six persons be called as murder until we don't come across any other planted evidence."

Cosmic had interfered, again.

Dan was lying calm and composed on the lap of his wife Radha err Rads. He fondly called her Rads. In front of them was a huge portrait of theirs caught in an intimate position when they were in their heydays having a time at a beach in Mauritius. Dan was looking with an eye of content and glee on his face.

"It's time we need to have our second honeymoon", beamed Dan looking playfully at Rads, his fingers playing with her curls.

She simply smiled at him, looking directly into his eyes. He got swept by it and melted as he kept on looking at her. Neither he nor she blinked; forget

moving an inch even though their backs ached. It seemed like they were reliving those golden days when they used to get so lost simply looking at each other that they would not even know when evening would turn into night. It was almost as if they were smitten by love, again!

The clock chimed bringing them back to present.

"Fancy going out for a dinner and then strolling the entire night?" Dan asked Rads and she immediately replied with a kiss on his lips and a nod of her head.

Dressed impeccably they hit the streets on Dan's little wonder, The VW Beetle. As the music kept playing, both of them engaged themselves to the melodious tunes, oblivious to the evening traffic. After more than an hour they reached their destination, Indigo. It was a plush restaurant located at one of the prime locations Mumbai possesses, Colaba.

They took the terrace for it provided a perfect dining ambience for them. A bit classy and private too. They were joined by a bald person, a bit fragile but with a strong command over his voice. He answered them with ease, showed the papers of Radhika'ss post mortem report stating that she died of an heart attack and also showed them a couple of photographs of Radhika's look-alike, a small time criminal sentenced to life imprisonment. They smiled at each other as he left. After having quenched their taste buds, both with the chef's superb dishes and with planting kisses wherever and whenever they can, they walked back, a bit tipsy from the drinks and awaited for the valet to drive their car to them.

The keys were still in the ignition when the valet had left leaving the door open. Both were standing in the opposite direction of the driving wheel with Rads pleading for allowing her to drive.

Just then, something happened and Radhika lost her consciousness.

The valet came forward to help Dan put Rads onto the back seat and he drove as fast he could surpassing all the signals, it being late night. He had even managed to alert the cops who were on duty at the signals but no one could match his driving skills, especially the speed at which he was driving. His one eye was on the road and the other on Rads. Upon reaching at the hospital he looked at the CCTV camera and marched the stretcher forward in the direction of the OT with the nurse and the doctor to his help. He managed to allow himself to smile as Radhika rose from the stretcher and

was placed by her look-alike. They silently escaped from the backdoors with doctor's gown and reached safely to their home.

"What is it?" barked the commissioner visibly upset on being called at four in the morning.

"Sir we have received some news from a top hospital", said the inspector.

"And I'm afraid to tell you that Dan Trilok's wife is no more. Radhika Trilok, the wife of the millionaire, the one who rules the stock market is no more and she has confessed to all the killings taking place in past few weeks", continued the inspector.

The commissioner muttered something under his breath. *"I'm on my way. Don't let anyone near the body and follow the protocol",* bursted out the commissioner and before he could say anything further the line went dead.

But not the case. He thought.

The inspector handed out a sheet of paper to the commissioner as he took his seat.

"What's this?"

"A confession letter, sir."

The commissioner read the letter and placed it aside.

Searches and enquiries led by the commissioner himself took place at Dan's residence and his office. Everyone were questioned, including her husband Dan. He answered him with a bit of distraught on his face but nevertheless answered. Or rather acted his part well hiding all his real emotions. Once the commissioner was out of sight, he cried till his heart ached and eyes burnt.

"It seems that Radhika is actually no more", concluded the commissioner. And with her confession letter given a nod by the forensic we can now conclude that Radhika was the murderer and eventually it got over with a heart attack." The commissioner was seen addressing the press conference but he wasn't at his normal self. He seemed a bit restless. But nonetheless the file is closed. He managed to smile at the end of the press conference.

"Radhika, are you ready for the hypnotizing session?" asked Dan.

She simply nodded and listened carefully with her closed eyes.

"Time for the cosmic to interfere and the distance to be killed", she repeated.

“I am not doing any wrong, just helping the distress to be relieved from all the pains”, she repeated him again.

“This can be termed illegal and so is smuggling. But here I am playing a dark knight in their lives, putting a stop to it when there is no meaning left to prolong the lives when all they can do is lie. Lie on the bed without any emotions to display and to see.” Rads repeated him calmly without dropping her shoulders. The room was lit by the candles that stood beside the walls. They sat opposite to each other with a burning candle separating them and his eyes were radiant that beamed a flash of light across the wall.

Rads opened her eyes only when he asked to, which was after an hour with passing on all the necessary information and guidance.

Cosmic will interfere, again.

And it did. Another patient in a prolong vegetative state had just been received in heaven.

And so did the commissioner. No, probably there is some time for him. But he had received a parcel. It read:

“In a hurry to close this case, eh?”

Along with it were the photographs of the deceased and Radhika. The commissioner was totally taken by surprise as he fell from his chair seeing the pictures.

He called in a leave and took a day off from his duty. But the mystery of Radhika and the deaths is definitely not going to allow him a peaceful time.

Dan had vowed.

It was that day when it all started. Dan and Radhika cried and begged for mercy killing aka euthanasia for Dan’s mother. The courts didn’t allow them to end the trauma, the pain, the suffering to their beloved mother who was in a vegetative state since almost a decade and going frail day by day. Eventually she died ending the misery. But now he chose to keep her alive in spirits convincing the relatives of the patients to end the misery.

And he preferred to call them Radhika.

About Shruti

I am a Mass Media graduate. Food & Lifestyle is my passion whereas Films is my first love. Reading and writing is somehow inherited in me because my father, grandfather and even great grandfather are avid readers. My great grandfather was a writer as well. Singing and dancing are my hobbies. Chocolates are irresistible to me in any form. My mother calls me "PICTORIA" with love which means 'TOTALLY FILMY'.

Love is everything

Vast treasure is hidden in nature. We wonder at waterfalls which splash out our sorrow and sadness, lifts us at new heights. Seven colors of rainbow depicts the poetry of nature. Majestic blue sky, greenery of earth and beautiful gardens transcends us to new world.

Sometimes we are forced to think why a beautiful rose flower is surrounded by thorns. Human nature resembles the contradictory elements too. I remember the girl Mirnalni who is so beautiful, attractive and intelligent mind but has aggressive and agitated mind with superiority complex. She never cared for other's feelings and emotions. She was harsh and ruthless. She just passed her tenth standard and took admission in new college. When everybody was busy in mixing and making friends she preferred to sit alone near the pond in the right side of college campus. Books were her companion.

One day as usual she was standing beside the pool somehow her books fell in the pool. She looked around for help, Anil came to help he took out the books and handed over the books to her. Instead of thanking Anil who was a gentle boy, she just nodded like that it was his duty to help. Anil disappeared. Time passed. She caught infection of throat and cold and could not attend the classes for a week. She managed to phone Anil and asked about notes and study material. Anil went to her house and handed all study material to her mother and did not try to meet her. Though her mother invited him inside but he excused himself as he knew her nature. Again she ignored and never thanked him. Anil expected but his own helping nature compelled him to help her always. He liked her style and intelligence.

The story of 'Farmer and Poor Boys' changed her heart. How the poor boys with little money helped the farmer who in return hugged and blessed the children and gave shelter to all orphan children in his hut.

Love is an eternal, innate quality of human being. Mirnalni's heart was changing. She tried to meet Anil. She felt for him. Anil too realized she is changing but he has fear as she was unpredictable. He always distanced himself. Anil never told her about her mother's asthamatic attack. She overheard him talking to doctor for her mother's medicine and she was in hospital.

Next day she went to hospital with flowers, fruits and home-made food. She sat beside her and helped in adjusting oxygen mask. She talked and told many interesting stories. Anil's mother liked her very much. This friendship and bonding was growing and spreading the wings of love. The tender seed of love has sprouted and soon we will see blossoms of two flowers together adding the beauty of garden. Love is such a beautiful emotion those elated who care for it.

Anil Ahuja was a simple boy with not so high aspirations in life and in a very young age he lost his father in a war. His father's last wish was that Anil should join army and serve his countrymen. He decided to go in army after his junior college but Mirnalni's aspirations were high enough to meet his and she went onto Canada to study fashion designing.

Time passed by and both became more mature and sensible than they were before at their early stage. He tried to pursue Mirnalni to do her fashion designing course from India but she being adamant on her decisions did not listen to him and went to Canada.

Somewhere or the other they were meant for each other. Mirnalni Iyer moved on in life and decided that she will not think about Anil anymore. She made new friends in Canada and also started liking a boy who studied management in her own college. His charm was to die for. Girls were mad about him and so was Mirnalni. Mirnalni being so determined in nature decided that she will one day propose this boy.

The boy's name was Shitij Ahuja. He was born and brought up in Canada. His parents were Indian and so all the morals and values were passed on to him by his parents. Shitij was a very committed person whether it was his work or relationship he equally devoted time for both. Shitij already had a girlfriend which Mirnalni was not aware of.

The college planned an industrial visit to Chicago which is situated in North America. Mirnalni applied for the visit and got selected for it. Mirnalni's wish was granted and even Shitij was selected for the trip. We generally call it luck by chance.

They both went for the trip and went to different destinations to explore in their own fields. But they stayed in the same hotel and at night they used to have their dinner together. Mirnalni found ways to talk to him but he was not at all interested in her.

The next day was an auspicious day for the whole team as they were going to get their results for the industrial visit trip. Mirnalni's performance was as usual good as well as Shitij also topped in his management project.

While returning back to Canada Mirnalni decided to propose Shitij and so she did. Mirnalni's heart broke when she came to know that Shitij loved another girl and soon they were getting married. Shitij being quiet a mature man became friends with Mirnalni and Mirnalni gathered herself and also became friends with him.

Soon two months passed by and Shitij's marriage took place in India. Shitij invited Mirnalni to his wedding and that was the time when Mirnalni met her first love Anil. Anil was Shitij's first cousin from India. Mirnalni's gleams made her face glow when she saw Anil in the party.

Anil also was internally happy to see her. They wanted to talk to each other but were quiet shy to do so. Then Anil's mother came and she was also quiet glad to meet her after such a long time. Anil became more sophisticated, handsome and charming personality after all he was a Major in the Indian Army. It was a transformation from a boy to a man.

One day Anil's mother called Mirnalni to their home and told her to find a suitable girl for him as she was his best friend in college. But inside her Mirnalni knew that now also she has feelings for him.

But God had something else written for them. Anil went on his mission and never returned for five years from there. There was no signal there so that he could keep in touch with anyone from his friends and family. Anil never wanted Mirnalni to spoil her life because of him because he had no guarantee of his life.

Mirnalni being very determined decided that if she will marry she will marry Anil only else she will not marry. Anil was a dutiful officer and for every army man his country is his first priority. Mirnalni being mature understood Anil's circumstances and waited for him till five years.

After five years Anil returned and they both went on a two day trip to borders as Mirnalni wanted to see the places where Anil got his training and the places where he goes for missions.

God had something else in store for them. One night they both were travelling from Wagha to Delhi by car. Everything was sound and they both had a pleasurable time there. A call came on Anil's phone that he has to

reach the border immediately so Mirnalni also insisted to accompany inspite of him saying ‘no’.

Heavy wars were taking place at that time. Anil was bothered about Mirnalni’s life as she was his first love and he never wanted to lose her at any cost.

Suddenly, some soldiers fired from across the borders and Anil went on to save her life and took the bullet in his chest. Mirnalni being helpless, cried and took him to the army hospital anyhow. A two hour operation went on in which doctors said that Anil is in a critical condition. Mirnalni prayed to each and every God so that Anil could be back in his senses.

Soon her prayers were answered and Anil came back to life. After coming into senses he said to Mirnalni that “LOVE IS ALL ABOUT SACRIFICE”. I never wanted you to lose your life just for me so I took the bullet into my chest.

Mirnalni’s heart beat became slow for a second and started pouncing very fast. Anil proposed Mirnalni in the hospital and all his co-mates clapped and congratulated them.

Soon they went back to Delhi and got married in a grand suite. Mirnalni’s parents were really happy as she was one of the girls who was really adamant and never listened to anybody. Anil was one man to whom she listened to. Anil’s mother was also very happy as she got a daughter in place of a daughter- in-law.

Anil went back to his rigorous work schedule and time to time Mirnalni went to meet him to his locations.

How can I forget the cherry on the cake. After three years of their marriage Mirnalni gave birth to two lovely twins named Ryan and Rhea. They exactly looked like Mirnalni. They had a happy, sweet and cherishing family.

About Akash

Akash Rumade a 22 year old belongs to a small town *Roha in Maharashtra.* Telling unconventional stories with unpredictable endings has become his passion. For now he pursues Civil Engineering at G.M.Vedak Institute of Technology. His first contribution was to anthology titled ‘Strings of Love’ .His other contributions have been ‘Turning Point of Life’, ‘Moonlit Matinee 3 – Notebook of Romance’, ‘Raksha Bandhan- an Anthology’, and ‘The Untold Love Stories’. He has been editor of anthology titled ‘Dream Castle’ published by Ridzee. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī’s poems have had an immense impact over him. He loves travelling to exotic places and has fascination for ancient history.

He can be reached on facebook on: - **fb.com/rumadeakash**

He is an ardent fan of J.K.Rowling, Nicholas Sparks, Sudeep Nagarkar, Chetan Bhagat, and many more.

You can even mail him at:- **rumadeakash@gmail.com**

Runaway

Runaway, that's what I've been my whole life. Earlier it was from a troubled teenage in high-school, then ragging and addictions in college days. I could never figure out why I kept running and towards what. But for now, I feel like I have escaped from every dilemma as I look at myself reflected from Radhika's eyes while travelling and adjusting us relative to the over-crowded local trains of Mumbai. It's been just few months since I have joined the same construction firm in which Radhika worked as a Design Architect. While she dreamt, I will try to fulfill at least one of them for I was assigned, '*Construction Manager'* for her projects. She has been part of this firm for almost two years and been living in this city for almost half a decade. After her persistent summoning for few months on Whatsapp, I finally decided to try my luck in this city. She was added in my, High-School Group on Whatsapp; thus began events of sleepless chats.

I had known her entire clan and herself since pre-school for we were raised up in the same city of Alibaug. We almost shared a crib back then. We never talked with each other in the train as we soothed ourselves to the music on shared plugged earphones. She used to sink in music and me in my thoughts. I looked outside at the untiring sea rising high and low as the winds maneuvered her. Seeing the sea stretching out itself, I found myself smiling as I found out answer to why I kept running away from this city. The reason being I was afraid to fall for this city. After all who wouldn't fall in love with, 'The City of Dreams?'

Radhika pinched me after futile efforts of signaling me to change the song. She wasn't fond of listening item-numbers on my phone. I shuffled to an upbeat song to make her feel good. Seeing her smile again and receiving a thumbs-up I drifted towards the derailed thoughts of mine. Maybe I was too weak or too proud to work according to stern principles of this City. Back at home I wouldn't even have work on *New Year's Eve.* But here I am working as conservatively as I could even on *New Year's Eve.* The crowd diminished slowly as we came near Navi Mumbai. I hit stop on my IPod as we neared Vashi which was our destination for now.

As we got down and came out of station, Radhika began her chit-chat with me on the usual office stuff. With a graceful strut she was able to ignore the

rickshaw-drivers who were always in rush to attract every passenger they can. Radhika followed a simple principle of, 'It was better to hire a rickshaw when you are destined towards work, but don't need one when you are destined towards home from station. Of course it had exception as in case it's very late or emergency.' Every penny that you save from futile spends is a 'Party Penny'. The more you save, the more you can spend on your party. I couldn't believe how she could still be jaunty. I just kept hearing to her non-stop chattering as I noticed, 'She breathed, I gasped in this city, still'. I found myself stranger even after living for four months in this city.

"Sorry, I didn't gave you chance even today to talk," said Radhika as she realized the look on my face.

"No issues, I am getting habitual to it," I replied. *"So how about a, Mocha before we head home? We can talk there too"*

"As you say Pratik, I owe you one after all for not making you feel like home," she said to me.

Growing old is inversely proportional to number of friends you make or have. You might be having those entire Whatsapp group piled up with the recurring silly jokes getting exchanged every now and then. But the heart-to-heart talk between friends has lost in the oasis of virtual reality. Get-together has just become gathering of people discussing how much one has climbed the *multi-dimensional social ladder.*

After giving our order for *Mocha,* we started talking on movies, upcoming novels, music, and cartoons. Discussions were popping themselves up randomly with no strings to tie them together till we received our coffee. Somehow we came back to topic of different sustainable designs of house. We can't escape our jobs; maybe it's a true thing. It's Circle of life, and we are entangled in it.

Suddenly Radhika began with, *"I miss home especially on New Year's Eve. I still remember after having dinner we used to go to beach and sit looking at bursting crackers up in the sky. A half hour dance amidst strangers on beach didn't seem much amusing but still it felt well. What about you?"*

I replied, *"I feel the same here, especially now when I am away from home for first time on New Year's Eve. It's not that I am totally home-sick, but I feel like a stranger here."*

She was a good listener sometimes, but I couldn't miss checking out her texting someone while talking. She had very few friends mostly colleagues at work, and her room-mate Priya. We were peas of same pod, for I just had work colleagues and her as a friend.

"It's my entire fault. I shouldn't have you made you realize that Mumbai was waiting for you. Actually it was I who was waiting for you. I know it was selfish of me but this city although filled with billions of people; you can smile at every one of them and make your day. But who will you share with what's inside your heart?" she asked getting engulfed with nostalgia and sentiments, as we walked each other home.

"No it isn't like that. It was after all my decision to come here. I was lost so I just followed a track you showed me" I replied.

"But you could have become someone back home too. You were free there and now you are here working to the clock and stuff" She said.

It was almost seven-thirty in evening. Night was still young and pretty to enjoy. Suddenly I asked her, *"How about I let you spoil our bad mood?'*

She asked back instantly, *"How can we do that? Almost all big hotels might be reserved and movie-halls might be house full!"*

It was not easy to figure out girls; women were toughest levels to tackle with. We had drink a beer or two at our apartment twice a week, but had never visited a lounge or pub together. I however had managed to get us passes for Karaoke Night party at Rude Lounge.

"Shall we go to a Karaoke party?" I asked somehow.

"Wow, that's great. But how?" she asked in excitement.

"I have got two passes for us. But didn't know how to ask! Where a girl might be expecting a candle-light dinner, I was hesitant to offer you pass for Karaoke party at lounge" I said explaining myself.

"Karaoke at Rude Lounge, rocks too Pratik. Lights will be dim at both places; we will be having good food, beer in case of wine and some good music. What's not to like?" she asked me back.

It was hard to believe what she had said just now. *"So let's get ready for the big date then?"*

"Date, huh? It took you four months to ask me out after all?" she asked as she opened door to her room.

It was a slip of tongue, but somehow I had managed to make her like me. Giving her a dumb-smile, I returned to my room and began getting ready.

After almost an hour we were outside Rude Lounge. She had worn a stunning dress enough to make everyone around us wonder who this beautiful lady was walking along with. I just controlled my excitement and we went inside the lounge after showing our passes.

The lounge was filled with groups of friends and couples drinking patiently and enjoying the classic rock music being played. Karaoke was yet to begun. As the *Captain* their helped us to grab our seats he brought the special menu. Initially we began with beer and kept grooving our feet, immersed in talking with each other.

"What's your new year resolution, Pratik?" she asked me.

"I haven't thought one. What about you, do you have a list as you used to have back then?"

"No I don't do lists now. As I grew old the number started diminishing. For now it's just to make next year better than this. You used to write in college?" she asked me as she took another sip of beer.

"Yeah I used to. But it was just poems for our college magazine and stuff. I haven't written anything new for at least seven years. Nothing prompts me to write," I replied.

"Maybe that's what you should add up in your list!" she exclaimed as she helped herself with *Cheesy-bites.*

"Do you want me to write?" I asked her.

"Yes, Pratik maybe it's time you become someone you enjoyed being back then." She said to me.

I had enough stories experienced by me. But to pen them down wasn't what I had thought of. Telling your friends about incidents is different thing. Writing was meant to make readers engrossed. *"I don't know Radhika, maybe I will think of it."*

"No pressure at all. Take your own time. But your style of writing was indeed alluring back then. The magic might still be hidden somewhere. You just need to wake up! Tequila?"

I was amazed to see her land up from pep-talk to request of experiencing madness. *"Tequila, seriously?"*

"Why shouldn't we? Let's make HNY 2K15 worth remembering!"

"Hey that should be my dialogue" I said laughing as it should have been guy's suggestion for tequila.

She replied me with a smart answer, *"I stole your script."*

After almost five shots of tequila we each were almost psyched. Signaling her I headed towards washroom to freshen up a bit. It was almost time for karaoke to begin. She told me to be quick. I almost ended up saying "I'll be back" in a very Arnold like tone. People tend to do crazy things when they get drunk and if its HNY then you might end up doing some little extra crazy. She couldn't help laughing when i failed to pull off classic *Terminator* dialogue. I just said, *"Maybe I am just a little drunk"* and went to the washroom.

After five minutes I somehow got near the mike before Radhika realizing it. And then the Karaoke host came on stage and announced the first performance. I almost stumble as I went near mike. But then music started playing and I got to senses almost to make that night special. I began with *"This one's for my Baby-boo."* Maybe it sounded a little too much but I would have excuse later. And then I started singing, '*Wonderful Tonight'* as lyrics started appearing on my screen. The people seem to enjoy, but then there was Radhika who was filled with mixed emotions. She just holds her hands together and lip-synched which I evaluated might be '*Thanks'*. And then as the song ended I came back to Radhika as people gave me a big round of applause.

"So is HNY 2K15 worth remembering?" I asked her.

All she managed to say was, *"Indeed. This was the best HNY eve I have ever spent with you, my best-friend."*

We spent almost two hours again talking with each other. As clock struck eleven I thought we should be heading home to celebrate. Before I could say she asked, *"Shall we head home?"*

"Of course, come let's go." The tequila had still disturbed our navigation system of brain. But we could walk back home for it was just one block away. As we walked I realize the air was chilling cold I helped her with my leather jacket. The city gleamed with lights and soon firecrackers will be bursting up in the sky. We didn't say a word until we reached our apartment.

"Want to have some coffee?" she offered me.

"*Decaf*" I said and entered her room with her. The room had been decorated with dim led-lights. In centre of drawing hall was kept a cake on table with '*HNY P&R'* written on it. On the wall was hung a collage of their photos since childhood.

"I wanted to make you feel like home" she replied.

"But when did you have time for all this?" I asked her looking amused.

"Collage was done a week ago, and Pooja took care of rest when we were at Rude's before going out with her boyfriend" she told me.

My eyes were almost teary for no one had done something that special for me. I didn't know how to express her gratitude. I just managed to say, *"No matter how busy we be every year, I will have a surprise reserved for you, Always!"* I could promise only that thing.

Sometimes it takes time for us to realize the love of our life even if we live in a metropolitan city like *Mumbai,* where things are supposed to work out in a flash.

"How about a dance?" she asked me.

I replied without thinking, *"Music, my choice."* I rushed to my room just in front of hers, and brought a disc-cover with little dust on it. It was a mix tape I had made for her long ago but never had courage to give her. Since things were working out well I thought of ticking my list of *New-Year's Resolution* by giving her the mix tape.

"I know it's quite late. Maybe even ten years old, but you might like it." I said as she went to play it.

"A decade ago is not vintage, Pratik. Let's see what you have got for me" she said as she played the tape.

She hummed as the music began to play. I knew that she was going to love it after all we had similar tastes. I took her hand in mine, and slowly the dance began. After a while she softly rested her head on my shoulder, and we kept slow dancing. As clock struck twelve, we wished each other, *"Happy New Year"* and intuitively I leaned myself towards her. I could feel her lips fused on mine. We had indeed fallen in love. We kissed passionately for few minutes, and as I said, the moment was going to be memorable for a long-time to come.

We came outside near gallery and enjoyed the scene of firecrackers bursting up in the sky. Its captivating movement and pattern transformation is worth every moment of watching, even though most of them don't last more than 10 minutes.

"Dear, look another year has ended beautifully!" she said as she holds my hand tightly.

"No honey, another year has begun majestically!"

Somewhere down my memory-lane, I remember reading, "*Be careful who you make memories with. Those things can last a lifetime*".

After two hours I suddenly woke up. It initially felt surreal but the smell of her hair and touch of her skin contradicted. Yes it all had happen for real as I found us both lying on the couch cuddled up together. My mind still felt dizzy due to the hangover of tequila. I was shock that I was still aware of what's going in my mind. Suddenly it dawned onto me. Yes, the fear of commitment. Fear of losing my freedom of being single, independent. Why didn't i think of all those things before kissing her?

Maybe it was a drunken mistake! No, I couldn't be wrong when it's her. I felt I wasn't ready for this even after years of loving the same girl in my memories. It looked like even she got too drunk to end up accepting my proposal. But then there was all that collage and cake which confused my mind more.

Sleeping on couch besides her in my hug was what I had dreamed since I started knowing what love was. Would she remember it all tomorrow when she wakes up? Will she remember about kissing me? Or would she just ignore what happen? Damn, I hope this should have happened in my dream. At least it would have been rehearsal for me. In my life I had experience for first time the magic of staying true to your resolutions. How could I turn my back on her then?

How could I break my resolution on the first day itself by being such a jerk?

The empty coffee mugs still lay on the teapot in front of me. I tried to get up but suddenly she caught my hand.

I felt scared whether my thoughts were too loud enough to wake her up. "Honey, do you need more coffee?" she asked me. Just hearing *Honey* from her was comforting enough. She woke up rubbing her eyes and gave a yawn.

I wanted to wake up every morning with her. I couldn't screw with such a good start by being a *runaway.* I couldn't let her go away from me by doing anything stupid. Setting my fears away I said, *"Darling, I just needed more kisses"*

I felt glad that we broke the friend-zone barrier as we took our chance to be together. Without speaking anything she answered my questions by hugging me more tightly and showering kisses on me.

About Payal

Payal is an engineer by degree, a literature student by choice and a technical writer by profession. She is not a frequent writer. However, she has penned down a dozen of stories. She loves travelling and teaching. She had also written a play for the class that she had taught which was staged at NCPA

Cashmere, I need Cashmere

‘Cashmere.. I need Cashmere..’

[Nobody responded. Maybe he should cry out aloud.]

‘CASHMERE.. I NEED CASHMERE!’

[The voice, proud yet supplicant voice tore the walls of the mansion, the exquisite brass and silver ware and the heavy drapery covering the long glass windows but it was never addressed until he had yelled thrice.]

‘CASHMERE..I NEED CASHMEREEE..’

‘Creak’, I opened the door and marched in plugging my nostrils.

His pearl white hair with a dab of black in them, his wrinkled eyes with darkened circles around them and his urine smelling room could make anyone repel him even his own blood..

‘Yes papa. Why are you yelling? Look I’m here now.’

‘Who? Lacey?’

‘No papa! your other not so adorable daughter Gracie.’

Now father has also forgotten my face! I know he never loved as much as he did Lacey but I am also his blood, his daughter

‘Oh Gracie! My dear! Can you tell your mother that I want her in here?’

‘Papa..mum is.’

‘Yes yes.. call her please.. CASHMERE..’

‘CREAK’ I opened the wooden drawer. Old creaky mansion it! Everything from doors to drawer to the inhabitants creak and shriek! I took out the ‘syringe’ which was covered in the cellophane covering. My old man’s eyes are stuck to the ‘syringe’ in my grotesque hands. He is conditioned to this by now perhaps.

‘No..not this Gracie.’

‘Shhhh.. papa..’ I grinned

First I drowned the needle in a small bottle containing the magical liquid and then I fed the ‘syringe’ from it. The valve of the syringe retreated further and further away till it could not farther itself away.

‘Papa here put out your hand… I have got what you wanted… here have it…’

The old man held his arm out in order to touch that imaginary, invisible cloth. *'PINCH…'* I emptied the liquid inside his cotton candy like soft pale skin. Now my father would be silent for about another day. The liquid was magical! It made his stimulus working but kept his responses falter! Exactly what I needed!

After the vaccination my dad's pupils dilated. It's not a rare sight. I've seen this happen before.

'Rest in peace, papa. I will come again when you wake up.'

My dad, Mr. Mistry apart from being old and weary and pissing in his own room was a well-known textile merchant. His fine sense to apprehend the fabric was much talked about in the city and in the nation too. In fact it was said that when the MP's and MLA's went abroad, they ordered suits to be made by the fabric selected by Mr. Mistry! Nobody knew if it was a rumor or if it was true but when asked about it to dad, he would curve his lips to give the curviest smile ever and deny the fact as if he was trying to covert something. The way he sensed his fabric was also unique. He touched the fabric with the tips of his fingers and then saw it with his eyes that owned dilated pupils and no sclera at all, as if he was possessed. If facial beauty was everything, people would have preferred an owl's eyes over his eyes. The city merchants were jealous of him. Every morning the head of Raymond would wake up, go to the temple and pray for my dad's gift.

Mr. Mistry wasn't always a textile merchant though. Once upon a time he was a young and an annoyingly pretentious lad who came to Mumbai despite his family's criticism and astrologer's warning. You know how sometimes people's faces have more of eyes and less of cheeks or more of cheeks and less of nose? My dad had more of eyes and more of nose and less of everything else that constitutes the facial features. His eyes were especially of a peculiar kind. My dad wasn't visually impaired but his eyes consisted of pupil and less sclera; very less. With these features he wanted to be a film-star.

Convincing his village folks, which let me tell you wasn't an easy task, he set out to the 'city of dreams'. He did few odd jobs here and few other there to sustain himself until he got his shot. He went hither and thither in search of roles to casting directors but who would take him with a face like that! One of the directors went as far as to say that if he agreed to gust wind out

of his two nostrils, he might give him the role of a table fan. He was humiliated, dejected and in hatred with his olfactory more than ever.

My dad knew a few words in English like '*thank you'* , '*hello', 'welcome' and 'sorry'*. He was soon hired in a hotel as a waiter and it was here that he first encountered fabric of rich texture. The softness of cotton, the smoothness of satin, the shine of silk and other drapery fabrics made his pupil dilate more. He could distinguish between the different drapery fabrics but didn't know their names. So he gave them his mind-fangled names. One of them he called Grace and another as Lace.

After finding his true home in the touch of fabrics, he soon left his job and marched in a textile merchant's office. Dad used to describe this encounter with great enthusiasm. He told us that at first the merchant and his servants made fun of him but when he was given a chance to prove himself, his pupils dilated and the sclera in the eye almost vanished! People thought he was possessed! He could differentiate between the minutest details in the texture of the cloth. As expected, the merchant took him as an advisor and taught him the world given names for his Grace and Lace.

This set the beginning of good fortune for my dad, the Mr. Mistry. After half a decade of saved money, tremendous experience and beaming confidence, he left the old merchant and set up his own business. He never experienced any lows in his career. Young girls, even teenagers fluttered around him and wanted to marry him because of his wealth. He enjoyed the attention. However, when he held a girl in his arms, his pupils involuntarily dilated and the name of the fabrics were scanned in his mind to suit the girl's skin. When first time it happened, the girl screamed and ran out of the room fearing that her rich suitor was possessed by a devil. He was in distress now.

My dad had everything but he lacked sensual pleasures though his problem was short lived. One day he went on a charity show to a blind school in Colaba to distribute his company's custom made cotton clothes for the inmates. While distributing the cotton suits, he met an extremely beautiful girl who must be a decade younger than him. She smiled at him and he knew that she was the solution to his problem. The blind girl Resham and my dad got married stealthily and started breeding mutants.

My mother's, eyesight could be restored but Mr. Mistry didn't want her vision to be back for obvious reasons. They consummated their marriage

without any screams with just frequent uproars in the husband mind- *'silk' no no.. 'cashmere' yes definitely 'cashmere'.*

My dad wanted to buy a plush bungalow before bringing his child into the world. So soon after marriage and after consummation of marriage, he bought a plush bungalow in Pali Hill. It was a two-storeyed bungalow which couldn't be turned into a high-rise. It was built in 1928 by a Portuguese merchant who had come to Mumbai to start an import-export business. It's said that the merchant was paranoid after India gained its independence. He feared that the mob would attack his mansion and plunder his beautiful home. So, after the dawn of independence, the Portuguese merchant ceased to step out of his mansion. He became extremely cautious, which made him mad. He killed himself after jumping from the terrace of his dream edifice. My dad bought the bungalow and made it the famous Mistry Mansion.

Each year a child's shrieking or crying pierced the mansion walls but soon they fainted. All my elder siblings expect one were shrouded within a year of their birth. Now that I think of it, I wonder, what were my parents thinking? My dad had an awful olfactory and vision–factory, and my mom was blind! What kind of kids would have they bore. They surely couldn't have a happy-ending. My dad pretended to be a very humble man. He named my elder sister 'Lacey' to reminiscence the beginning of his career. Fortunately, for my parents and unluckily for me, 'Lacey' lived the crucial one year and then continued to grow and blossom.

After 2 years of Lacey's birth, I was born, the unfortunate one. My mother died while giving me birth. Probably that was the reason, why my dad never got attached to me ever. I was named Gracie!

'Gracie come and have your milk! Gracie, do not touch that! Gracie, do not go there!'

Lacey has always tried to mummy me. I hated that. She has always been that good girl whom everybody liked and whom my dad especially adored and to whom I am constantly compared. Gosh! She's gone for good! She is good at studies too so dad has sent her some good college and I am left here to nurse him. But this plays well for me as I am taking care of him really well… [grin]

I think it's time I should call Lacey. After all the adorable daughter and lovable father should spend some time together before…shhh

I remember the time when I was disgusted by my dad's vision-dysfunctionality. I would get scared and run away from him and scream and holler. What do you expect from a little girl? I was just 12 and I saw my dad getting possessed! How was I supposed to act? But as always I was seen with scorn and grimace. Once I heard my paternal aunt and my dad talking in the master bedroom which was obviously my dad's room. They were talking about Lacey.

'Lacey is just like Resham, Mistry. I can see Resham in Lacey', said my dad.

'Yes sister. She never got scared of my eyes. Instead she had come to me and sat on my laps that day and asked 'does it hurt dad?' How I loved her after that. She is just like Resham but Gracie…She isn't like her.'

'Every child is different dear. Give her some time.'

'Yes..'

I was so annoyed at my aunt and my dad but more than that I hated Lacey for being like mom, all goody-goody. The rift between me and Lacey knew no bound. The Berlin wall was constructed between us and no one could destroy it. I liked the chocolates that my aunt brought for us though. They were from the finest shop in Belgium! That's the only thing I liked about her.

Lacey arrived before nightfall and like an arrow struck into dad's room.

'*CREAK'*

'Gracie, what are you doing in dad's room? Where is he?'

'Well hello Sista! You reached before expected time.'

'Yes, I came as soon as I heard from you. But where's dad?'

'I moved him to the room next to the storeroom.'

'What? But why?'

'Well I thought…'

'Shut up Gracie! How could you do that to an old man? This was his room!'

'He was pissing in his own bed and stinking all day. I didn't want to make this bedroom uninhabitable for anyone. That's' it. I meant no harm sista! And yes before you go to meet him I advise you to take these nose plugs with you. You will thank me later!'

'Gosh! How could you..? I'll deal with you later. First let me meet dad.'

‘CREAK’. Lacey shut the door behind me.

‘Bye bye sista! Have a good chat!’

Such a smug she is! Once she enters his room, she will find out why I moved dad in another room. The room looks like a bedlam with him in it and with that stench how could someone go inside!

Lacey went inside dad’s room. The urine odour mixed with medicines made her nauseous.

‘Hey dad! How are you feeling..?’

Dad looked possessed again so nobody could make out whether he was staring at the wall or ceiling or looking at Lacey. The spark that had once mesmerized the world had gone. He was barely speaking but he managed ‘Cash’ from the stupefied state. It’s weird to hear an almost dying man talking about ‘Cash’. Some will think what a greedy man he was. But my dear ‘sista’ understood what he meant. At once she went to dad’s closet and took out my mom’s ‘cashmere’ shawl. Classic Lacey!

I went in the room and asked Lacey to come out. I knew dad wouldn’t talk to her or anybody else because the medicine I gave him was still undergoing some irreversible reaction inside his body and running in his veins.

‘You must be tired Lacey. You sleep now. He won’t respond to you right now. Moreover we have business to discuss tomorrow.’

‘What ‘business’ and why tomorrow? I’m sure your ‘business’ can wait till dad gets fine.’

‘He isn’t getting better sista! Can’t you see that?’

‘Gracie, you know what? You are totally opposite of your name, totally graceless and ungrateful!’

‘And the lecture starts again, blah blah. You please sleep now and spare me your speech!’

Fine. I’m in no mood to start preaching. Good night.’

‘Good night.’

I shouldn’t give dad his dose tomorrow because then he won’t be able to talk to Lacey and she will try to sniff in things which will create trouble for me.

The next morning the family lawyer and the doctor came in to discuss the health and wealth of dad. Yes, of course I called them. I can’t wait more.

The doctor went inside the room with the nose plugs and examined him. When he came out he claimed that dad probably had a day left to breathe. Lacey had started crying by now. Then the lawyer went inside, took few minutes to chat with my dad. Then he came out and asked me to go inside. My dad looked at me gravely and said

'You have taken care of me. And you did it well. I never thought you love me more than Lacey.'

'What? Is it a miracle or what? He thinks well off me!'

'I do not have memory of the past two months. But the doctor told me how you took care of my medicines and food and nursed me every day.'

'Dad…'

I wanted to say something, anything but I just choked. Though choking was partially due to the smelly room. I never thought this man could be kind to me. And now when he is, he's about to die.

'How much do you love me, dear Gracie?'

'A lot dad..'

'Me too..'

'Yeah! Can you believe it? I said that! And he said that! I meant what I said, at least at that moment I surely did.'

'Send Lacey in dear', said dad.

I was dumbstruck. One part of me was happy other was sad and another was feeling guilty. Lacey went in and after sometime the lawyer and I went inside too.

'Divide my property in 70:30 and divide it between my daughters'

'*Yes sir I will but whom to give the bigger share?'*

The eyes of my dad were losing their blackness. The subdued sclera was now rising and quietening the pupil.

'Dad??'

'Mr.Mistry?'

'Dad!'

'Cashmere..cashmere..give me Cashmere..'

As soon as dad said this Lacey went out of the room running to find a cashmere cloth. I remained there, dumbstruck with mingled emotions.

'Mr. Mistry answer fast', asked the lawyer.

'DAD..DAD!!'

Dad looked at me and took my name

‘Gracie, Cash..’

‘Ok Mr.Mistry.. Gracie it is.’, said the lawyer

Lacey rushed in with the cashmere cloth and handed it over to dad. I was just staring.

‘What are you doing lawyer? Dad is dying!’, cried Lacey

‘That’s why I’m doing it miss. Let me do my job. Mr. Mistry I need your signature but I think in your condition…a thumb impression will also do.’

The lawyer took the thumb impression from dad and just after that his eyes became completely white.

Dad was buried besides mom with a cashmere shroud and lace around its border.

About Vishal

VISHAL BAGARIA is a postgraduate in Management and a self-proclaimed lover of drama, who believes that without it, the world is way more boring and tasteless than British food. Born and brought up in Kolkata, a city struggling to accept its own midlife crisis, in a Marwari business household, his proclivity for eating, travelling, reading and escaping into virtual realities goes without question. He is an ardent fan of JK Rowling, Sidney Sheldon and Gillian Flynn, and he loves observing people in crowded places (till it doesn't get creepy). He prefers writing stories hinging on characters and their shades of gray.

What She Wanted…

Prologue

Sujata chucked her purse callously onto her bed and dragged her feet to the armchair. Her temples throbbed, the headache turning from bad to worse by the minute. It was right at that moment when she missed Om's slender fingers smooth their way across her forehead, all love and concern. A lot more than she had initially figured had stood in common between them. A blank stare at his garlanded photo that hung on the wall was nowhere close to solace. She sighed.

"I miss you so much…" she said to herself, sinking into her chair and looking into the deep-set grey eyes of her husband, who smirked back at her from the gold-framed portrait.

In the middle of a vain effort to rub her own chubby fingers against the withering skin above her eyebrows, her mobile phone started ringing. She frowned in exasperation upon reading the name.

"Yes, Mansi," she said coolly into her handset.

"Suju," came the high-pitched reply from the other side. The need to begin with the customary 'hello' had long been shunned mutually by both sisters, notwithstanding the sharp dipping frequency of their conversations from days to years. *"I need to talk to you about Sahil."*

"Yes, tell me."

"So he told me today after he got back from office that he is seeing this girl and that he wants to marry her - "

"Congratulations!"

"Shut up, first listen, Suju! He tells me, he wants to marry her and settle with her in Bangalore ... she's working for some bank, okay? I'm all fine with it, of course! But then," she added after a slight pause, *"he shows me her picture on his phone. And I'm like, no bloody way are you ever going to marry that woman! Remember, I told you about that girl I had a fight with in the aisle at Big Bazaar the other day? How rude she was, remember?"*

"No, Mansi, you didn't tell me anything about that."

"Oh," said Mansi sounding slightly taken aback. *"Anyway, I've met her before. We had a fight at Big Bazaar at the aisle and she was extremely rude to me about cutting a queue or something! The point is, I don't even like the sight of that girl, Suju. What should I do now, please tell me? I can't even - you know - look at her and here is my son, probably giving her flowers and proposing and what not, while I'm here talking to you. He's even taken the car, imagine - oh, I got to call you back, Suju,"* said Mansi abruptly, as though an unwanted intrusion had cropped up. *"Wait up, this may take time."* She disconnected.

Sujata had nearly taken a sloppy aim for her phone to land next to her purse, when another time, it crooned on the ringtone.

"Hello?"

"Er - hi, Sujata Bhabhi? Hi, yeah, this is Deepak here. How are you?"

"Deepak ... Deepak ... Oh! Deepak! Hi, long time, how are you?" Sujata replied, massaging her bursting temple.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Bhabhi. Listen, would it be rude if I came over right now? I really need to see you. Will it be possible -"

"Now, Deepak?" groaned Sujata, glancing at her wristwatch that ticked at 2130 hours and inwardly wishing her brother-in-law postponed his urgency till morning. *"Ummm..."* She waited, but there was no reply yet from the other side.

"Alright, come."

Strange, she thought as she hung up, *what does he need now?* She was almost up from her armchair, when a knock sounded on her door. Her son strolled in.

"Mumma?" he said, his voice dangling between the softer baritone of a man and the high-pitched leftovers of puberty.

"Hi, Shivam, come in, child - not the carpet!" she barked, as soon as her son was about to put his slippered feet on her Turkish rug that had cost her near a fortune only for intricate gaudy patterns snaking all over it. Shivam backed and journeyed the longer route around it towards the other end of the plush room where his mother had one hand clutching her phone tightly, and the other, holding the curved end of the hand rest.

"What's it, child?" she asked, beckoning him closer. Shivam, nevertheless, maintaining his distance, said, *"Can you lend me a thousand now, mumma? I'll cut it from next month,"* he added hastily.

"Yeah, take what you want from the purse. Anything else? How was your day?" But before she could complete her sentence, Shivam had already traversed the length to her bed, unzipped her purse, pulled out a sole note, zipped it back, put it exactly where it was and stood at the door. He smiled and showed himself out in no time, leaving Sujata smiling stupidly back at the mahogany veneer.

Sujata's phone buzzed again, with a text alert. It was from Yusuf.

> Found the pills! Had forgotten them in pyjamas, lol! Anyway, how's the headache? Taken the med I told u to?

Sujata Mahajan groaned at the text of her friend from college days, nearly forty years of it; she hadn't touched the medicine for quite some days now. She chuckled, as she reverted:

> Lol, glad you're still alive with all the clumsiness, Yusuf! Headache's worse, have bought the meds, will take them soon… BTW, Mansi's having child love problems. And remember Deepak? Om's stepbrother? He's coming over now…

Before Yusuf's reply beeped, a car engine sounded in her driveway. In the next few seconds, footsteps on the carpeted wooden stairs creaked and, a knock later, a balding man in his forties showed himself in.

"Deepak!" half-beamed Sujata as she forced herself into a half-embrace with her brother-in-law. *"Is everything alright?"*

"Er - not really, Bhabhi," he replied, sitting down on the spare pouffe opposite the armchair. *"I'm so sorry to show up like this! You know about the new thing I'm starting up, right? The food truck?"*

Not wanting to enter into a prolonged chain of cumbersome allegations of No's and conversations hinting at his lack of contact after Om's demise, she simply nodded.

"Well," he carried on, *"we have run into financing problems, Bhabhi. Gautam ran away with everything ... the thief!"* He hurled out a train of abusive vocabulary, before he took notice of Sujata's cringe. *"I'm sorry, Bhabhi, but - but that rascal - he took off with every single penny of my sweat! Can you believe it?"*

Sujata's head split from within, as she listened to another rampant parade of expletives for someone she did not even know.

"... Would it possible, if you could just - you know ... God, I'm so sorry even asking for this ... but if you could just, break the FD…?"

“No, Deepak. You know I can’t.”

He gaped at her for a while, and then nodded.

“Of course,” he said, but added hurriedly, *“but you still have connections! I mean, it would be great, you know, if - just someone could-”*

“I can't be certain, Deepak, but I'll ask around. How much do you need?”

“Four and fifty? Lakhs. Would that be possible by the week?”

In minutes, Deepak made himself out of her room, a wide smile plastered on his sweaty lips; Sujata’s phone pinged again.

Lol, ya, what does he need now?

And then, as though it were a mighty bolt of lightning, it slapped her squarely in the face. Now inching closer to her 60s, the clouds finally started clearing … She glanced back at the photo frame hung on the wall, her eyes widening with a revelation she had subconsciously been aware of all her widowed life …

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Act I
Mansi & Sahil

Mansi had never felt more relieved than that other day, after her video call to her sister. At 58, Sujata was a mine of worldly wisdom. After Om, Sujata had fully well taken upon the mantle of the patriarch of the Mahajan empire, risen it to heights Om could never have in his entire span and, in the process, dragged herself further and further aloof from any social life or family, including Mansi.

Yet, every time one needed a master opinion on any problem, howsoever grim, they could safely bother Sujata just like an old friend and emerge content with a plausible solution.

“If you want the family to stick tight, get someone you would see yourself in, Mansi,” Sujata had advised. *“The new generation of girls are a tricky lot, nothing like what we were. Just the other day, I heard of this divorce... The girl says, she couldn’t bear her in-laws’ interference in whatever they as a couple wanted - fled off with all the jewellery, all his cash, and if that wasn’t enough, she demanded alimony! Love marriage, again! Mansi, please, just ask your son if it really is love or …”*

The printer made its buzzy noises as copies of Sahil's biodata spluttered themselves out. In another hour, the broker Sujata had recommended would meet her. A little bit of money and a huge show of urgency should most certainly get the ball rolling, she wondered and smiled coyly.

Meanwhile, Sahil parked his Volkswagen outside the cafe on Southern Avenue. Garima's impatience would know no end. His insides bounded with happiness on that thought. Sujata Maasi had given him a fine advice, something his own mother would neither bestow nor dare go against …

"Do what your heart wants, Sahil. Otherwise, you can never be happy, your entire life. Your mom or I won't be there forever, your wife will. But first, ask yourself whether it really is love, or…"

He had made his decision.

Deepak

"It's okay if I write you a cheque, Mr Deepak?"

His pulse had shot up; although Bhabhi had called him up with a disappointing answer, a week later, his fortunes took a turn when a certain Mannalal Joshi called him at his office. A five-foot tall man in his seventies, the man had worn white dhoti and kurta, and a golden tooth glinted every time he smiled. Deepak shook hands with him and, left his office an hour later, pocketing three cheques totalling Rs. 4,50,000/-. Should he inform Bhabhi, he contemplated, as he waited for his bus. 1.5% on that loan was more than good luck! *Later*, he thought, as he clambered onto his transport.

Shivam

Sujata urged to glare at her son, anger bubbling within; instead, she bore a stony look on her face. The pack of Benson & Hedges stuck ominously in one palm, as the other hand held her hip. Shivam stood in front of her, his head bowed low.

"Why?" she said softly after a minute of forced silence. *"I never thought you of all people would do this, Shivam. Why?"* she said, brandishing the pack of cigarettes at him.

In a sudden move, she slumped upon the bed, scowled at the floor, muttering inaudible words, like:

“I was a bad parent ... your father couldn't have lived with this ... I've never been a good mother ... you let me down ... see me dead ...”

And then she sniffed. A confused Shivam saw, a bead of tear roll down her cheek. Shell-shocked for a second, he stared weirdly at his mother. Known for her wild temper, her high decibel that always reverberated throughout their mansion in her fits of anger, the woman who blinked at him with teary bloodshot eyes was a completely different person.

He gulped and walked up to her. Sitting down next to her, he hugged her sideways.

“I'm so sorry, mumma,” he croaked. “I’ll never touch them ever again.”

***

Shivam fed his mother the soup, feeling guilt pangs for having caused her high blood pressure. How she had even found out about the smokes, he wondered. Then again, she had her spies, their servants, swarming all over. Maybe, one of them spotted him at the paan shop in the back alley … He ought to be careful next - NO, he stopped himself, as he caught his mother eyeing at him dubiously. No more cigarettes!

Her phone vibrated at a distance. He fetched it. As soon as she answered Sahil’s call, a tornado of yells burst from the phone. Once that subsided, she said, *“Don't worry, first of all calm down and both of you, just come here.”*

In minutes, Mansi drove her furious self and a silent Sahil to the other end of the city where her widowed sister lived with her son.

They explained everything to her, part by part - how Sahil had given Garima the ring, had brought her home thereafter, how he had stubbornly expressed his final decision to marry nobody but her, and how the conversation had snowballed into a fight …

Sujata took Sahil inside her vacant room, while Mansi waited outside; in between his muffled sobs, he said how he had acted upon her advice, gone to Garima, proposed to her and brought her home to meet his mother, who had, without his knowledge, floated his biodata! Then, along with Sahil, Sujata stepped out to comfort her sister.

“Look, Mansi, if these two really love each other, who are we to have problems?”

“But I don't like that girl, Suju! The biodata is out already! You only said -”

“It doesn't matter! The children love each other. Look, do you want to die as a mother who stopped two lovers from marrying? Do you want to die knowing that your son hates you from within? Do you want to be the villain of his story, Mansi?”

By the end of that night, as Mansi and Sujata sat in the lounge sipping hot coffee, she felt a pang of heroism bubbling within her. Yes, the boy would never forget what his aunt had done for him… She smiled inwardly at the train of thoughts that spiralled out then…

“I can't believe how I can thank you, ever, Maasi,” said Sahil, stepping inside his car.

“Don't worry about it,” she said. She smiled, waving them goodbye, ignoring the pangs of pain in her forehead.

The next morning, Sujata woke up to 5 missed calls and 10 SMS alerts from Deepak. Apparently, Deepak had managed to borrow from a Mannalal Joshi, who had withdrawn all the money from his account the next day. So naturally, all the cheques Deepak had written to his creditors had inevitably bounced. And now, he stood facing criminal charges against himself: the police would be arriving any minute.

Idiot, she thought. This man can never do business!

She dialled another phone number, talked to another man, before calling Deepak and telling him to meet the other fellow. As she went about her task, she couldn't help but feel overjoyed, as the debts piled on …

***

Act II

Deepak felt like he had a narrow escape. Right in time, Sujata Bhabhi had fixed him up with a lender she knew, someone trustworthy who wouldn't dare do what Joshi could've ever done to him … and this time, Deepak ensured that he went back home with a duffel bag full of hard, crisp notes instead of lose cheques. He made the payments as necessary and heaved multiple sighs of relief. The criminal charges evaporated swiftly as the cash made into the hands of the necessary parties.

How he could be more grateful to his sister-in-law ever, he wondered, as he knocked on Sujata’s front door with a bouquet. That was the least he felt he

could do for her after months of no communication with either his dead step brother or his wife …

Mansi had finally given in: Sahil *would* marry Garima. Why should she be the villain after all? Despite all the sibling rivalry, Mansi accepted unquestioningly that she never had what it took to be Sujata, ever. Her sister was an enigma. Sujata had saved their relation from crumbling at the eleventh hour, the angel who swooped down and picked you up in your last minute … Mansi, too, was grateful, as soon as she saw her son, all blooms, call up his fiancée and convey her good news.

"Your aunt is God, Sahil," sobbed Garima. "We should meet her personally and thank her."

"Yes ... she stood like a rock by our side, Garima," explained Sahil as he drove her to his aunt's mansion. *"I don't know how can we ever ..."*

"What do the doctors say?" asked Yusuf, sipping on his tea.

"No cure," replied Sujata curtly. *"There is absolutely no cure."*

"And how long have you known of it?"

"A few months now..."

Yusuf looked into his friend's eyes with deep saddening forming in his own.

"Just like Om, Yusuf ... Told you, we had more in common than we thought ..." said Sujata with a wink. *"Any breath I take, can be my last,"* she added softly.

"Don't say such a thing!" snapped Yusuf, putting his cup with a loud thud on the table.

At that instant, the ajar door flung open and Deepak stood there. Taken aback, his smile wiped off his face, as he looked from Sujata to Yusuf to Sujata and then back to Yusuf. He frowned. Yusuf smiled and Deepak caught the familiar glint of gold.

"You thief!" he bellowed and raged at him like a mad bull, the flowers cast aside and trampled upon on the floor. Before Sujata could stop him from crushing all over her Turkish rug, he had already stomped through and reached Yusuf to grab his collar.

"Leave him, Deepak!" yelled Sujata, wrenching her brother-in-law away from her friend.

Deepak scowled at Sujata for a moment and then, another flash of recognition later, he understood.

"You! It was you… You sent this man … " he whispered, breathing heavily. *"Like always! And I thought … My God! You did this to me, Bhabhi?"*

Yusuf rose from his seat.

"I can explain, Deepak," began Sujata, but Deepak had already begun mumbling to himself.

"Listen to her, Deepak," said Yusuf, but he felt a fist on his face before any warning.

"DEEPAK! HOW DARE YOU!"

"You keep out of it," he yelled at Sujata. *"You wanted to play the hero, eh? First ruin lives and then come down like a bloody angel to save us, right? You manipulative bitch!"*

He felt a crushing punch land on his cheek, as Yusuf tore at him. Sujata's terrified sight darted to the door, where she saw two people standing, hand in hand, and witnessing the brawl in utter shock.

"STOP IT!" she yelled at the dueling men. *"Sahil! Garima! Come inside!"*

Sahil took one good look at his aunt, held Garima's shoulder, turned around and left without a word, leaving the trio completely dumbstruck.

"Oh," snarled Deepak. *"So you helped those two as well? Let me guess, they came here to thank you like I did? My God, Sujata Bhabhi!"* And he laughed maniacally, as Sujata stared blankly at him.

"You'll pay for it," he warned her almost hysterically. *"Om was an idiot to have married you. I bet he saw right through you the night you - the night you gave him the pills!"* He gaped at his silent sister-in-law in utter horror. *"They found an overdose of sleeping pills on him … it was you, wasn't it? Only you knew about them … "* He clapped his hands to his mouth, when Sujata did not refute.

"My God," he mouthed. *"My God! You killed Om! For what, Bhabhi? All this? So that - so that -" he spat at Yusuf. "You're having an affair too!"*

"*Stop*!" yelled Yusuf, his hand outstretched. *"You're taking this too far, Deepak!"*

"Don't talk to me, you fraud!" snapped Deepak, glaring at Yusuf. "She wanted all of this. All of Om's wealth, everything! She killed him for this! My God, I don't know how many lives she has ruined… you - you better leave before she messes up your life too!"

"You know what, Deepak," said Sujata at last, bottled up rage oozing out. *"Why I told Om to never let you in on the business? Because I was the only one who saw you for what you were. A complete idiot. With no sense of anything! Who the hell takes cheques from strangers at 1.5%? Om wanted to be a good brother to you, never make you feel like the unwanted child that you always were - so I suggested him to put business ideas in your head, only to keep you off from our's. But I was only buying time; oh, I knew what a failure you'd be in all of those and eventually come back crying to us! Don't gnarl your stupid teeth at me, face the truth as it is! And, besides, had you really been a good brother, you'd have known, Om was going to die anyway. It was aneurysm, yes! Right here, in the bloody brain! Did you bother to even talk to them then? Did you even know what it felt like, to see him live every goddamn day of his life in that constant fear of death any second now? One moment light and the other - "* She stopped to catch a breath.

"I couldn't see him like that, Deepak, and I still tell you that I did nothing wrong in giving him the pills. Check my reports, I have the same bloody problem. I don't want to play God, dear! I just can't! Any minute now - can be my last!" she added, as she panted heavily, watching the men stare back at her, confusion writ on one's face and sympathy on the other's. Nobody spoke.

At last, she wailed her heart out, dropping onto the floor, while the men gazed at the lady in front of them. A whimpering Yusuf dashed to pick her up. The throbbing had gotten far from worse …

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Epilogue

Three months later

Shivam Mahajan lay on the bed, his eyes half open, his BlackBerry kept aside. The Turkish rug had come to his room now.

"Why all that, though ..." he whispered. *"For what ... Mansi Maasi and her family never even talked to us after that. Mom went mad apologising, but they just wouldn't listen. They didn't even show up at the -"* he paused, a lump rising in his throat *" - funeral. Deepak Chacha too showed up only*

when the lawyers came. Didn't she realise they all had started hating her? Didn't she get it when she was staging all that drama? Why did she do it, Uncle?" The lump reached his mouth.

Uncle Yusuf looked up from his ledger, into his godson's deep set eyes. He sighed.

"*Your mother was a storyteller, Shivam, a woman of multiple hues ... always been, since college ... in her last days, she identified her real problem. It wasn't what the doctors called aneurysm, never was, but a strong sense of crisis she felt from within ... You see, insecurity flooded her in, in her last few months. I know of it. People, her own family, including you, spoke to her only because you needed her. After your father, she had drifted apart from everybody ... Nobody left to love her anymore, you see, she thought. However bad it may seem now, she longed for all that company, all that love, she thought she deserved, to be the mother and the sister that she was ... she feared the crisis of false identity after she'd move on to the other world, son. The problem she wished to solve before her attack."*

"But, you were her best friend. You were there for her ... "

"There's the difference, young man," smiled the old man warmly, pocketing his half-moon spectacles. *"I was friend, not family. She wanted the family she had probably given up everything for, the son she regretted not spending enough days with, the sister and brother-in-law who had way more reasons than they saw to stay in her debt, so on ... All that drama was quite possibly to show she felt wanted, she deserved to be wanted too. But, people see what they want to see, whether the truth might be totally opposite of what they're shown. Pity, they all forgot who your mother really was. Pity, in the end, nobody really needed her to be around..."* he added quietly, closing the ledger book.

Shivam mulled over that, as his BlackBerry pinged an alert loudly.

"You can take that," prompted the aging man, eyeing at the phone. *"I'll leave now. And Shivam,"* he added, as he rose from the armchair, replacing the ledger on the bedside table, *"do tell me whenever you get those dreams about your mother again."*

Shivam nodded. No sooner had Uncle Yusuf shut the door behind him, than Shivam inhaled deeply and pulled open the bedside drawer. He brought out

the lighter, carefully took out a cigarette from the fresh pack and lit it, as he checked the message on his phone:

> Shivam! Hi, Garima here. Sahil's wife. I don't know if its the right thing to text u. Mumma doesn't want me to talk to you about it, with all the history, but Sahil is in a real bad shape. They don't even see eye to eye now. I didn't know who else to talk to about it. Can I pls call now?

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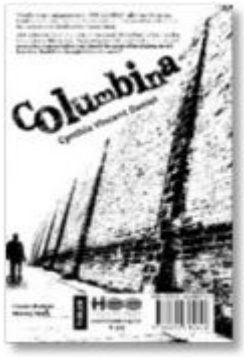

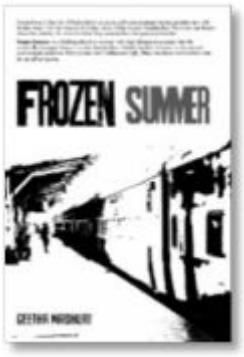

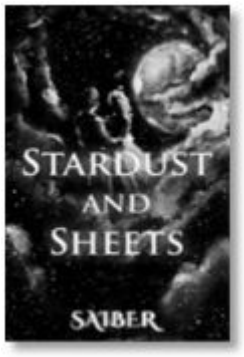

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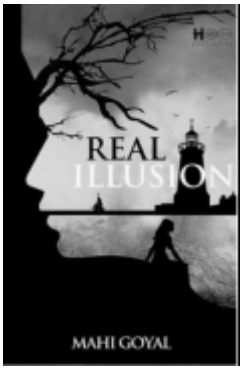
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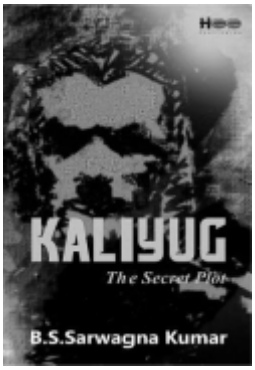
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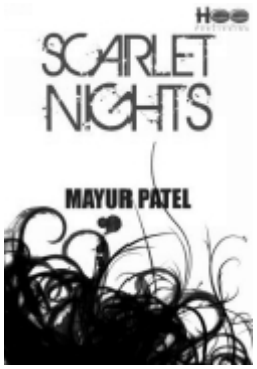
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